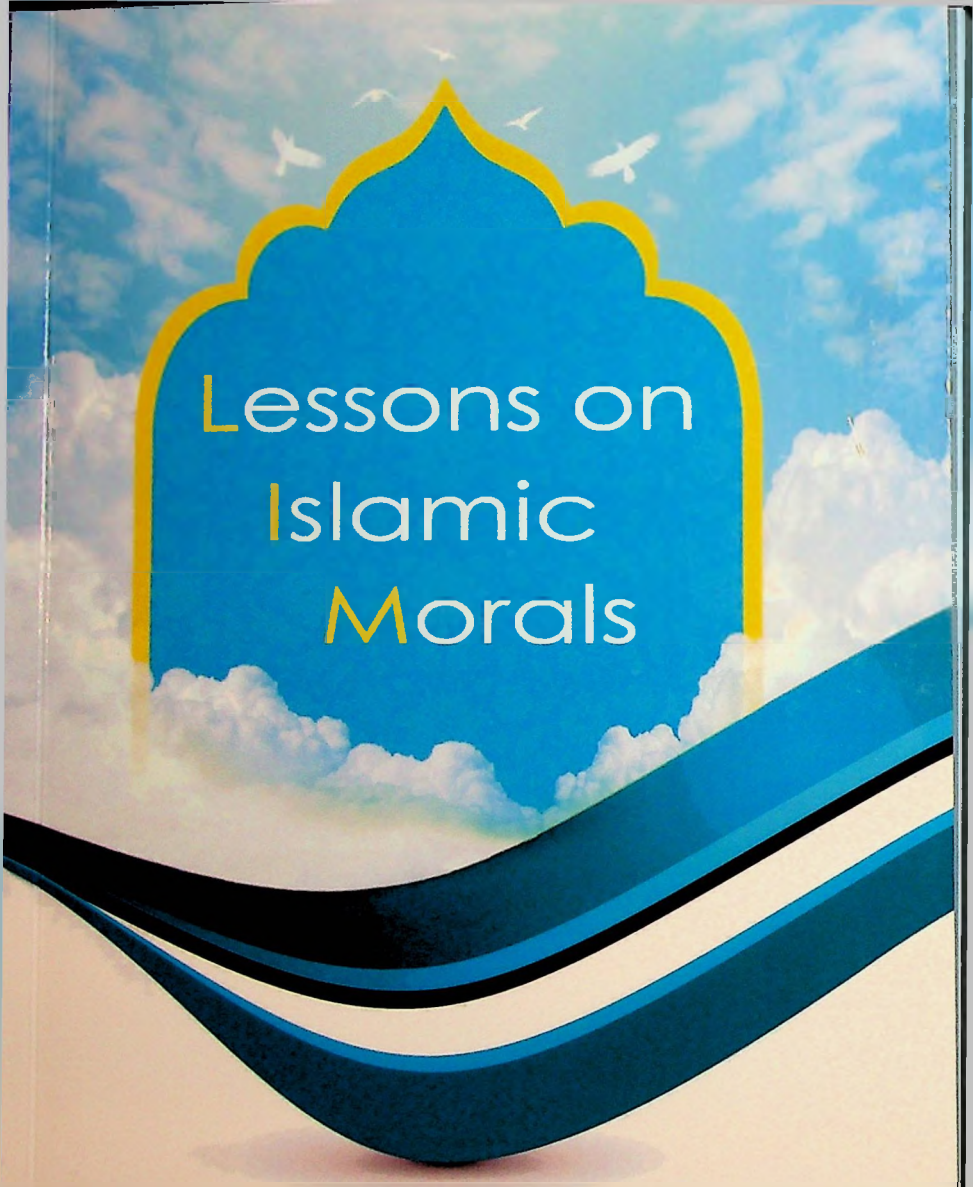

# Lessons on Islamic Morals

Mohammad Ali Shomali

**Second Edition**

Institute of Islamic Studies
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# *LESSONS ON ISLAMIC MORALS*

Mohammad Ali Shomali

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Mohammad Ali Shomali

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*In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful*

## Introduction

This book is based on a series of 30 lectures delivered by the author on Islamic Ethics in Qum in winter 2012. The series was delivered as a course for a correspondence degree on the subject. Each lecture was around 25 minutes and was recorded in a studio.

Thanks to God, the series has been used by correspondence students from the academic year 2012-2013 till now. Due to the importance of the subject on the one hand, and need for more texts on the subject in English on the other, it was decided to publish it as a book as well. After preparing the transcripts, the text was edited and references were added. Some parts which were more philosophical were removed. We are now pleased to present this humble book to our dear readers. It is hoped that they will find it useful for their study of Islamic morals and find it of help in their personal moral development. At the same time, I admit that

more work needs to be done on this in order to make it more precise and concie.

I take this opportunity to thank God for all His blessing in the past and present, and ask Him to help us in our search for knowledge and virtues. I thank all the brothers and sisters who helped me in this project and pray to God to bless their lives and multiply their reward.

Mohammad Ali Shomali

London, 20th January 2017

# Lesson One:

# Definition of *Akhlāq*

## Introduction

The science of Islamic morality, which in Arabic is called *'ilm al-akhlāq al-Islami*, is a very broad area of study. In the present work we are only able to touch upon certain issues in this field. It is not possible to do justice to this important topic, particularly in view of its central role in Islam. Nonetheless, this should not prevent us from studying it to some degree.

Before studying the issues and problems discussed in any science, it is necessary to understand some things about the science itself; for example, we need to know the definition of the science, its purpose, its goal, the methods of approaching its problems, and the benefits of studying it. Accordingly, before advancing any further in our study of *'ilm al-akhlāq,* we must define the term. Even before that, however, we ought to have a clear definition of the word *akhlāq* itself, a word that has been used for centuries by Muslim scholars to refer to ethics.

## Definition of the Term *Akhlāq*

*Akhlāq* is the plural form of *khulq* which comes from the same root as the word *khalq*. In order to fully understand the meaning of the word *akhlāq* and its singular form which is *khulq*, we must first study the meaning of the word *khalq*.

*Khalq* is a very familiar term in Arabic and has been used in different ways in the Qur'an. *Khalq* means "to create" or "creation." God uses various terms in the Qur'an to refer to the act of creation. However, one of the most frequently used terms is *khalq* which is the root for the verb *kha-la-qa*.[1] His names *al-Khāliq* (meaning "the Creator") and *al-Khallāq* (meaning "the Creative" or "the One who creates a lot") come from the same root. This term also serves as the basis for the term *akhlāq*.

Every human being possesses both *khalq* and *khulq*. In this lesson we will define each of these terms and look into the difference between them.

### *Khalq*

If we could observe each and every creature we would find that God has created human beings in the very best way. In the Qur'an, God says: "*We certainly created man in the best of forms* (95:4)."

[1] The past tense which means "He created."

As far as our creation is concerned, we have been given the best form of creation. The point here is that we have been given the best form of creation to serve our purpose as human beings. In order to reach our maximum level of perfection we do not need to be the largest or fastest animal. What we require is a body that serves our purpose as human beings, and more importantly, a soul which has no limit for achieving understanding, for acquiring virtues and vices, and for moving towards or away from God. This is why in the Qur'an God says:

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الانسَانَ فى أَحْسَنِ تَقْوِيم ثُمَّ رَدَدْنَاهُ أَسْفَلَ سَافِلِينَ إِلا
الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ الصَّالِحَاتِ فَلَهُمْ أَجْرٌ غَيرُ مَمْنُون

*We certainly created man in the best of forms then We relegated him to the lowest of the low, except those who have faith and do righteous deeds. There will be an everlasting reward for them.* (95:4-6)

Mankind has been given the best form of creation. But human beings can end up becoming the lowest of the low or the highest of the high depending on how they utilise their potential. Of course, there are also people who occupy a position somewhere in between these two points.

We can find people who are the lowest of the low, indeed even lower than animals because animals do not have an intellect and so they are not expected to act rationally like we

are. It is not wrong for them to do things for pleasure or to satisfy their desires. However, as human beings who possess intellect, it is wrong for us to drop everything and decide only to seek worldly pleasure and satisfy our desires. Describing such people, the Qur'an says:

أُولَٰئِكَ كَالْأَنْعَامِ بَلْ هُمْ أَضَلُّ

*They are like cattle; rather they are more astray.* (25:44)

This means that animals cannot be regarded as misguided for acting in the way that they do. But human beings can be considered misguided when they act out and this is why they can be counted as lower than animals.

However, human beings can also reach a very elevated position to which even angels cannot access. Of course, angels are very good and pious, and they glorify and praise God all the time. But since angels do not face the challenges that we face and they do not have any desire for worldly pleasures, they are not capable of achieving the same elevated position as human beings who have to endure a vast array of challenges in order to perform the same things that angels do, such as glorifying and praising God.

Therefore, there is a wide spectrum of levels that a human being can achieve, from being the lowest of the low to being

the highest of the high. Every human being holds a rank somewhere along this spectrum.

The whole purpose of our creation and of being given free will and guidance is to make sure that we endeavour to elevate ourselves higher and higher in order to reach the height of perfection. But naturally, not everyone chooses to try to be the best, or at the very least to be good. Therefore we have a whole range of different kinds of human beings.

Now, we will return to the term *khalq*. As far as our form of creation is concerned, we are almost all the same. If we observe both the most virtuous people and the most vicious, we do not find much of a difference between them as far as their form of creation is concerned. Of course, there may be some differences. Some people may possess talents that others do not possess (or at least which are not as developed or strong in them), some people are taller than others, some are physically stronger, and some may be more beautiful, and so on, but these differences are not great enough to prevent us from being considered and categorised as human beings. As proof that there is no relationship between having a physically strong body and a strong soul, history contains numerous examples of wicked people with physical attributes which are better than those of virtuous people. There are virtuous people who are physically weak, and wicked people who are physically strong, and vice versa. One should not be surprised to encounter a very pious

person suffering from physical illnesses. Therefore, we can conclude that what makes us a better human being is not our physical creation; our physical creation has been taken care of by God in the best possible way given the realities and limitations of the physical world.

***Khulq***

*Khulq* is what we are able to acquire. It refers to those aspects of a human being – good or bad qualities, virtues or vices – which are shaped and formed over time. The ability to elevate or degrade ourselves spiritually is related to our *khulq*.

A supplication which is recommended to recite when one sees oneself in the mirror is as follows:

اللهمَّ كَمَا حَسَّنْتَ خَلْقِي فَحَسِّنْ خُلُقِي

> O Allah! In the same way that you have made my physical creation (*khalq*) good, please make my qualities of the heart (*khulq*) good as well.[2]

God has given us so much in our physical creation. He has given us numerous blessings, many of which we do not even know about or are not able to understand. Within our body there are countless things that have been designed by God to

[2] *Tuhaf al-'Uqūl*, p. 11

keep it healthy. Even those who suffer from various ailments should understand that compared to what is functioning properly, the problems which they have are like one in a thousand if not one in a million because usually we only suffer in certain areas of our functioning. Therefore, our body, which is part of the creation of God, is very great.

In addition to our body, we have our heart in its spiritual sense, which is even greater. There is a phrase in a poem attributed to Imam Ali (a) which reads:

اتزعم أنک جرم صغیر

وفیک انطوی العالم الأکبر

And you think you are a small mass while inside you there is the greater world.[3]

According to Muslim mystics there is a universe inside us, like the external universe around us, which is so magnificent and so great that even when compared with the external universe – with all the galaxies positioned in it – it can be called 'the greater universe' (whilst the external universe can be called 'the smaller universe'). Therefore, if one could understand all the wonders of one's soul it would no longer be surprising to know that the greater world is inside of us. This is precisely why in the Qur'an God has described a very high status for mankind. Indeed, He has given human beings

[3] *al-Wāfi*, vol. 2, p. 319

His Trust which is something that it was not possible for even the mountains and the earth to bear. The Qur'an says:

إِنَّا عَرَضْنَا الأَمَانَةَ عَلىَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَ الأَرْضِ وَ الْجِبَالِ فَأَبَينْ أَن يَحْمِلْنَها وَ أَشْفَقْنَ مِنْها وَ حَمَلَهَا الانسَانُ

*Indeed We presented the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it, and were apprehensive of it; but man undertook it.* (33:72)

The mountains refused because they did not feel like they were able to hold such a weighty trust from God. However, mankind accepted it because human beings have been given a spirit which is so great that God attributes it to Himself:

وَ نَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِن رُوحِي

*And I have breathed into him of My spirit,* (15:29)

So this is the condition of mankind with regards to their creation. Then they have to actualise and realise their potential, and benefit from those talents. If they do so then they will achieve an excellent *khulq* (moral character). However, if they do not make such efforts and instead are lazy or make efforts in the wrong direction by insisting on doing incorrect things, then they will go in the opposite direction.

Thus, with regards to *khulq*, we find good and bad, virtuous and vicious. This is why whenever we look at ourselves in the mirror we are recommended to ask God to make our moral character good in the same way that He has made our physical creation good. So we can realise why *'ilm al-akhlāq* is so important and why for us as human beings it relates to the very essence of our humanity.

### Difference between *Khalq* and *Khulq*

So far we have tried to explain the meaning of the term *akhlāq* and in doing so we started with its root which is *khalq* (creation). After this we mentioned that a human being has two aspects. One aspect is our *khalq,* which is the common physical or even spiritual creation of man in its state of potentiality which is more or less the same in all human beings. The second aspect is our *khulq. Khulq* consists of the good or bad qualities which we acquire over time. Now we will explore further the difference between these two aspects of a human being.

Some people are selfish and others are very much in control of their ego. Some people are brave whilst others are fearful. Some are greedy and some are not. People exhibit many differences in character which are of utmost importance because the physical characteristics which we all have in common as human beings are generally something given to us and so we cannot claim any credit for them. The reason for this is clear. For example, being tall or handsome, or

reaching a certain age, are not consequences or results of our own efforts. We are given these things simply due to the state of being human and thus we are not responsible for them in the sense of being questioned about why they happened as they did. Of course, we are responsible for looking after our health, but our health or our body in themselves or our reaching a certain age, are given to us as blessings. We are not responsible for simply having them but rather about how we use them. For example, on the Day of Judgment we will not be asked why we are male or female, tall or short. Therefore, most physical qualities are merely things which we have been given and are more or less common to all human beings. Therefore, being or not being a good person is not based on or even related to those physical qualities.

However, there is another aspect of our existence, which is the moral one. This is where we find many differences between individual people. Sometimes we discover two human beings who look very much alike but who are totally different in terms of their behaviour. This difference can be even more marked than the difference between a human being and an animal. It could actually be said that sometimes the difference between two human beings is greater than the difference between an angel and an animal. How do we know this? The answer is simple. Given that a human being can rise to a position higher than that of the angels or descend to one which is lower than animals, it can easily be

understood that therefore the difference between two individual human beings can be more than that found between an angel and an animal. Thus, we can conclude that this aspect of a human being is very crucial.

There is a beautiful expression in the Qur'an in which God refers to the Day of Judgment as the day in which the hidden qualities of man will become manifest:

يَوْمَ تُبْلَىٰ السَّرَائِر

*On the day when hidden things shall be made manifest*
(86:9)

In this world we have some qualities which are obvious and apparent to all, such as the physical qualities of the colour of our skin, our size, our age, our ethnicity and so on. These are things which we recognize by simply looking at people. And then there are also things which are inner qualities. These are called *sarā'ir*.[4] We cannot see these qualities. We can see someone's colour immediately but we cannot realise straightaway whether someone is a brave person or not. Indeed, even if we witness brave actions performed by a particular person, this does not necessarily mean that in reality they are brave since those actions might have been accidental.

---

[4] *Sarā'ir* (سَرائِر) is the plural form of *sarīrah* (سَرِيرة) which is the hidden quality and it comes from the Arabic word *sirr* (سِرّ) which means secret.

In this world we only see the outward appearance[5] of people and sometimes their deeper qualities may remain unknown to us for years. Sometimes we live alongside someone such as a colleague, neighbour, or even a spouse and yet we are not aware of some of the inner qualities of that person. Sometimes we believe a person to be good whilst their reality is the opposite of what we think, and vice versa.

Therefore, we have to be very careful when making judgments about people. Firstly, we ought to try to avoid being in any way judgmental. Secondly, if it is really necessary to make a judgment we should avoid being hasty and jumping to conclusions. Thirdly, after having to make a judgment we should not pass it on to others. Thus, even if it becomes absolutely necessary to make a judgment, we must then keep it to ourselves. Furthermore, even for ourselves, we should not think that our judgment is necessarily definitely correct. Human beings are very complicated, making it extremely difficult to form a sound judgment about them unless we know them very well and have the insight needed to see beyond outward actions in order to form a clear judgment about the reality and hidden qualities of that person. Moreover, human beings can change, and so the judgment we may have made – based on particular things we thought we knew about that person – may now be incorrect because those things have changed. For example,

[5] *Sūrah* (صورة)

the person may have realised a mistake in their thinking or actions, and decided to repent, to God and reform themselves. Or they may have acquired a new virtue, or even a new vice, making our previous judgment void.

However, on the Day of Judgment we will be in a very different condition. On that day, in the same way that today we can look at people and recognize their physical appearances, we will be able to look at people and realise whether they are believers or not, whether they are pious or not. We will even be able to look at people and realise which bad qualities they have. This is why it is referred to as the day when all the hidden qualities become manifest. Regarding this God says:

يُعْرَفُ الْمُجْرِمُونَ بِسِيمَاهُمْ

*The guilty shall be recognized by their marks [on their face].* (55:41)

Elsewhere in the Qur'an, in Chapter *al-Tahrīm* (the Forbidding) and Chapter *al-Hadīd* (Iron), God says that on the Day of Judgment we will see that believers have light and this light goes ahead fast in front of them and on their right hand side. The same idea is found in both chapters with only slightly different phrasing.[6] However, on the same day we

[6] Chapter *al-Hadīd* (57), verse 12:
يَوْمَ تَرَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَ الْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَسْعَى نُورُهُمْ بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَ بِأَيْمَانِهِم

will see that those people who are hypocrites have no light and ask the believers: "*Please let up on us, that we may glean something from your light!*" (57:13)[7]

Thus, we will be able to realise who is a good person and who is a bad one simply by looking at them, without even needing to see the record of their deeds.

*Khulq* is the hidden side of us in this world. On the Day of Judgment everything becomes very obvious and indeed, most of the focus, if not all, will be on our *khulq* and not on our *khalq*. If we are judged, praised or blamed, rewarded or punished, allowed to join the group of good people or ordered to join the group of bad people on the Day of Judgment, it is not because of our *khalq* but rather it is due to our *khulq*; it is not due to our skin colour, gender, age, physical strength, or weight. It is due to the qualities of the soul which we have either achieved or failed to achieve.

Therefore, this is the most important challenge for us. Each and every one of us must take care of our spiritual health in the same way that we take care of our physical health.

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*The day you will see the faithful, men and women, with their light moving swiftly before them and on their right…*

Chapter *al-Tahrīm* (66), verse 8:

نُورُهُمْ يَسْعَىٰ بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِم

*Their light will move swiftly before them and on their right.*

[7] The Arabic text is as follows:

يَوْمَ يَقُولُ الْمُنَافِقُونَ وَ الْمُنَافِقَاتُ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا انظُرُونَا نَقْتَبِسْ مِن نُّورِكُم

Indeed, we should care about our spiritual health much more; we only need our physical health for a maximum of about a hundred years but we need our spiritual health for eternity. If we suffer physically it won't last forever but if we suffer in our soul then it will bring about bad results forever and lead to eternal suffering.

*****

**Summary**

*Akhlāq* is the plural form of *khulq* which comes from the same root as the word *khalq*. *Khalq* means "to create" or "creation." God uses various terms in the Qur'an to refer to the act of creation. However, one of the most frequently used terms is *khalq* which is the root of the verb *kha-la-qa*. His names *al-Khāliq* (meaning the Creator) and *al-Khallāq* (meaning "the Creative" or "the One who creates extensively") come from the same root. This term also serves as the basis for the term *akhlāq*.

**Human Beings Have Two Aspects:**

***Khalq:*** the common physical or spiritual creation of mankind in its state of potentiality, which is more or less the same in all human beings. These physical characteristics are not the factors which determine whether we are good bad. There can be no possible form of creation for mankind, other than the one that we have, which would better serve

the purpose of our creation – this being to achieve utmost closeness to God – and this is something unattainable by any other form of creation.

What makes us a better human being is not our physical creation; our physical creation has been taken care of by God in the best possible way.

***Khulq***: This is what we are able to acquire. It refers to those aspects of a human being – good or bad qualities, virtues or vices – which are shaped and formed over time. The ability to elevate or degrade ourselves spiritually is related to our *khulq*. This is the moral side of our creation wherein lies the real difference between people.

In this world the physical appearance of people is seen and the reality of their moral qualities is generally hidden. However, on the Day of Judgment, the qualities of the soul become obvious and people will be judged based on them.

## Lesson Two:

## The Science of *Akhlāq*

### Introduction

In this lesson we will first study the subject of the science of *akhlāq*. Then we will try to further explore the definition of this science and refer to various people's thoughts on the subject. Finally, we will discuss the aim of the science of *akhlāq*.

### The Subject of the Science of *Akhlāq*

The science of *akhlāq* (*'ilm al-akhlāq*) deals with understanding our present position and discovering how we can elevate it. In the science of *akhlāq* we study *khulq*, which is our spiritual or moral aspect and refers to those qualities which are not physical. We also study good and bad actions.

The science of *akhlāq* is the science which deals with mankind's character traits, vices, and virtues. In Islamic morality we deal with virtues and vices, and also with the actions which are related to them. We do not merely discuss actions as do some ethical systems. Some ethical systems, especially in the twentieth century, are influenced by the theory of behaviourism in psychology. According to this

theory, everything is a form of behaviour, and the spirit – as an immaterial substance from which behaviour sprout – does not exist. Their focus is placed solely on behaviour and thus, some people have also restricted ethics merely to a study of the moral behaviour of human beings which constitutes their good and bad actions. However, we believe that the most important things to study are the qualities of the soul, such as vices and virtues, and also actions and behaviour, because our actions are very important in forming or maintaining our virtues and also in helping us to achieve our aims and objectives. We need to acquire virtues so that we can become pious, move closer to God, and find happiness in the hereafter. For these same reasons we should also perform good actions. We can neither disregard actions nor disregard qualities of the soul. However, relatively speaking, qualities of the soul are much more important because they are enduring, they form our personality, and we will be resurrected in a condition which is based on the qualities that we have.

### The Difference between "Ethics" and "Morality"

So far we have studied the subject of the science of *akhlāq*. At this point, we need to further explore the definition of this science. When it comes to the term commonly used in Arabic, there is no ambiguity and it is easily understood when we say *'ilm al-akhlāq*. However, in English, two different terms are used: the science of Islamic ethics or the

science of Islamic morality. We must first clarify these two terms and then continue to define this science.

"Morality" and "ethics" are used in different ways. Sometimes when the word morality is used what is meant is the moral character of a person, group, religion, society, or community. Thus, the set of morals adhered to by one person can form the morality of that person and in such a case, it is a matter of describing a reality rather than a prescriptive science. However, at other times the word morality is used to indicate a science which deals with moral character traits or moral actions, and this is where it comes very close to the science of *al-akhlāq*. Thus, it can be said that Islamic Morality is the area of Islamic science which is responsible for studying morals.

"Ethics" sometimes refers to the study of morals and at other times refers to moral philosophy. Therefore, "ethics" can mean morality as a science or it can mean moral philosophy as a science. Moral philosophy deals with the science of *akhlāq* as a subject. In other words, it tries to investigate the presuppositions, concepts, epistemology, and even the ontology of the science of *akhlāq*. These are the different things which can be meant by the term "ethics."

Since we are concerned with the Islamic science of *akhlāq*, it does not make much difference for us whether we use the term Islamic morality or the term Islamic ethics. However,

we have to be clear that at present we are discussing the Islamic science of morality and we are not talking about Islamic moral philosophy or Islamic philosophical ethics.

### Definition of the Islamic Science of *Akhlāq*

The Islamic science of *akhlāq* (*'Ilm al-Akhlāq al-Islami*) is concerned with the study of moral virtues and vices – acquiring moral virtues, protecting against moral vices, or removing moral vices if already present – as well as good and bad actions. Thus, in the Islamic science of morality, we deal with both qualities of the soul and voluntary actions.

The discussion regarding actions is limited to those which are voluntary. This is because we are not responsible for those actions which are not under our control. For this reason, involuntary actions are not studied in this science. As an example, blood circulation in our body, the growth of our hair, or our hair turning white as we become old all happen involuntarily and so they are not under our control. This is why they are not studied in the science of *akhlāq*.

On the other hand, anything that one has to voluntarily decide to start doing or at least can decide to stop doing is studied in this science. For example, breathing is something that happens naturally but the decision to stop breathing is something that can be studied in the science of *akhlāq* because one has control over this action. This is why we say that a person must not deliberately prevent themselves from

breathing and commit suicide. For an action to be studied in the science of *akhlāq*, there must be some role for human freedom in it and thus, every voluntarily action, whether good or bad, is studied in this science. Of course, good actions are studied in order to be able to perform them more easily and more frequently, and bad actions are studied with the intention of preventing them from happening. This concept is something very important which makes the Islamic science of *akhlāq* comprehensive.

**Various People's Thoughts on *Akhlāq***

Before giving examples of Muslim scholars who have studied *akhlāq* in this way, as a contrast, it is good to read about various other people's thoughts on *akhlāq*. According to some contemporary western ethicists, the science of ethics is responsible for explaining what sort of behaviour is appropriate. They only focuse on behaviour and do not go beyond this. It would appear that they do not want to admit that there is something much more profound underlying these behaviours, which are the qualities of the human soul. For example, Gex says that "Morality is to investigate human behaviour as it ought to be."[1] Or a French philosopher called Paul Foulquie says: "The science of morality gives us a set of laws and regulations which relate to

[1] Gex, *Falsafeh Akhlāq*, translated by Pourhuseini, Abulqasim, p. 9

behaviour acting upon which can help us in achieving our goals."[2]

Thus, for such people *akhlāq* is responsible for advising on what sort of behaviour we should adopt in order to be successful in achieving our goals. Therefore, for example, for a businessperson, business ethics would merely explain how to be a successful businessman and no more than that. Or for a doctor, medical ethics would explain how to be a successful doctor and how to reach one's goals as a doctor. It would be considered sufficient to behave properly and observe the laws. However it is not considered to be of concern should someone suffer from serious diseases of the soul. For example, if a doctor helps their patient in accordance with no more than the legal and professional requirements but does not have heartfelt love and care for them, this is considered perfectly acceptable as they have outwardly behaved appropriately. So this is one approach to the science of morality.

As we said, in the Islamic understanding of morality the main focus is placed on the qualities of the soul and heart. We should purify our heart, remove all bad qualities and vices and, at the same time, we should also make sure that we behave properly. These things go hand in hand with one another. However, this does not mean that it is being

[2] Cited in *Falsafeh Akhlāq*, p. 10

suggested that for some years one should first examine and purify their heart and only then, after being certain about the state of one's heart, should one think about one's actions. This is not the Islamic way of doing things.

It is important to make sure that we are not completely preoccupied with our actions. We should not be satisfied merely by good performance or observing laws and regulations. We should also place great emphasis on solving the root causes of problems and not just their symptoms. These two things need to go hand in hand.

Many famous Muslim scholars have voiced their thoughts on the subject of *akhlāq*. The late Mullā Sadrā, Sadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, spoke about *al-hikmah al-'amalīyah* (practical wisdom) which is the title used for the practical aspect of philosophy which also deals with morality. He said:

> Sometimes when they say practical wisdom they mean the traits of character themselves, sometimes they mean knowledge of traits of character, and sometimes they mean the actions which result from traits of character. Therefore, when it is used in contrast to theoretical wisdom [which included metaphysics, mathematics, and physics] it means the science which studies traits of

character, whether good or bad, and every action that originates from them. [3]

Therefore, according to Mullā Sadrā, practical wisdom, or in other words the science of *akhlāq*, is the science which deals with character traits and the actions that originate from them. As the Qur'an says, people act based on their character:

كُلٌّ يَعْمَلُ عَلى شاكِلَتِهِ

*Everyone acts according to his character.* (17:84)

In Persian there is a proverb which says: "What comes out of a jug is the same as what it has inside." In the past they used to keep water in containers made out of clay. The reason for this was that a small amount of water could penetrate through the clay and find its way to the surface of the jug. So there were always drops of water on the surface of the jug which would then evaporate, resulting in a reduction of temperature which would make the water inside the jug cooler. Thus the jug would act as a natural cooler. Other liquids could also be kept in such a jug. Therefore, the poet says that, depending on what kind of liquid is put inside

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[3] *al-Asfār al-'Aqliah al-Arba'ah*, vol. 4, p. 116. The original text is as follows:

ان الحكمة العمليه قد يراد بها نفس الخلق و قد يراد بها العلم بالخلق وقد يراد بها الافعال الصادرة عن الخلق فالحكمة العمليه التى جعلت قسيمة للحكمة النظرى هى العلم بالخلق مطلقا وما يصدر منه

this kind of jug, naturally the drops appearing on the surface of the jug will be of the same type of liquid. If salty water is put inside the jug then, when water penetrates through the clay, there will be salty drops of water on the surface. If juice is kept inside the jug then drops of juice will appear on the surface. Although it will not come out completely but somehow part of it will appear. However, it is impossible to put orange juice in the jug and have apple juice on its surface.

Human beings have hidden qualities inside their heart, of course in a spiritual sense. These qualities may be so hidden that even the person themselves may not be aware of all of them. Therefore, we need to reflect on our own personal qualities. However, the actions that we perform are like those drops of water that appear on the surface of the clay jug in the proverb mentioned above. In the science of *akhlâq* we have to examine both the liquid inside and the wetness which is on the surface, and that entails studying both qualities of the heart and actions.

Actions can be suggestive of the quality of the soul which has caused them. However, this is not always so straightforward. For instance, we cannot be sure that a person is generous merely by witnessing that they invite guests to their home once or twice. Of course, there must be something good involved in doing this but this does not

necessarily mean it has become a habit which is rooted in generosity as a quality of the soul.

It is necessary to study actions, whether good or bad, and then encourage people to perform good actions and refrain from bad actions, whilst at the same time encouraging them to continue this journey until they have made sure that they have achieved good qualities and virtues. After this, if and when virtues have been acquired, it is not going to make that much of a difference whether there is an opportunity to act on them or not.

For example, someone might be a very generous person who is looking for opportunities to help needy people but there are none to be found. Of course, it does not mean that their generosity is useless. Generosity is there and God loves that person because of this generosity. It is simply that there is no needy person around to help in order to show this sense of generosity outwardly. Furthermore, maybe there are poor people needing help but one does not have the means to help them. Either way, one's generosity is still very valuable.

Another example is that of a very brave person who is ready to sacrifice himself to protect people who are weak or vulnerable but there is no present need for this bravery to be acted upon since everything is safe and sound. Regardless of the situation, he is still considered to be a brave person.

Therefore, sometimes there are virtues which do not appear outwardly as actions because the opportunity did not arise. This is not a problem, although of course it would be better to find opportunities for action if possible.

Furthermore, actions can sometimes be accompanied by virtues and at other times they are not accompanied by viertues. Actions performed hand in hand with virtues are much better, but even if they are performed without the presence of virtues they are not useless and should be persisted with until eventually the relevant virtues are acquired and become a permanent feature of a person.

The late Ayatullāh Mutahharī, in his book *Understanding Islamic Sciences*, which is an introduction to Islamic sciences, has a section on practical wisdom (*hikmate 'amalī*), including *akhlāq*. In it he says that the science of *akhlāq* teaches us how to live, and that this has two aspects. One aspect is with respect to our behaviour, meaning how we should behave, and the second concerns how we should be. This section is deliberately chosen and mentioned here because he then goes further to say that rather than the science of *akhlāq* merely studying our behaviour and our qualities, it actually teaches us *how* to be and *how* to behave. This demonstrates and explains how qualities form and then influence who we actually are. He continues by saying that our life and the way in which we decide about our life have two aspects: one is

our behaviour and the other is our very being.[4] This shows that we are who we are mostly due to our qualities. Actions are very important but as explained previously, there is a great chance that they might not be very deeply ingrained and established in us.

As mentioned previously, it is not possible to figure out someone's level of generosity by merely witnessing them carry out two or three acts of generosity, or to conclude that someone is not generous simply because they are not seen to be acting generously. The latter situation may simply be due to the fact that they do not have the means to do so or maybe that they have the means but there is no one in need at that particular time. So although that person is not actually doing anything at that time, they may still be a generous person and whenever it is necessary their generosity will appear in the form of certain actions. Therefore, both our behaviour, which relates to our performance, and our very being, which relates to our qualities, are very important. However, naturally, our qualities should receive more attention.

Furthermore, in the first volume of his *al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'an,* which is the best available commentary on the Qur'an, the very well-known late 'Allāmah Tabātabā'ī mentions that the science of *akhlāq* is the science that deals

[4] *Ashnaei ba 'Ulüm Islami* , vol. 2, pp. 191-192

with human character traits (*malakah*).[5] He then goes on to say that these qualities can be related to the faculties that we have, which may be related to our vegetative, animal, and human life.[6] After this he says that the purpose and aim of this science is to help us to a) discern between virtues and vices, b) acquire virtues or strengthen the virtues we already possess, and c) identify and remove vices. In this way we should then be able to perform the good actions which are implied by those virtues, and we would therefore have people in our society whose actions are praiseworthy. He also says that by acting according to *akhlāq*, people can achieve their happiness and salvation with respect to both the theoretical and practical aspects of humanity.[7] So, according to him, the primary consideration is character traits which of course then lead to certain actions.

It should be noted that when scholars like 'Allāmah Tabātabā'ī or Mullā Sadrā say that practical wisdom deals

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[5] *Malakah* is a quality which is established in a person in such a way that it is not easily changed. It is a quality which is possessed in such a deeply ingrained way that a person can act accordingly without much effort or struggle.

[6] There are three different levels of soul and life: vegetative, animal, and human. We possess all three of them. Of course, this does not mean that we have three souls; rather, what we mean is that a human soul has the perfections of the souls lower than it, these being the vegetative and the animal souls. Plants possess only the level of the vegetative soul and animals also possess the higher level of the animal soul. Human beings possess the perfections of the vegetative and animal souls, as well as the human soul.

[7] *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an,* vol. 1, pp. 370-371

with character traits and the actions which issue from them, this does not mean that a person must necessarily have a particular quality and then the corresponding action arises from it.

Sometimes we have a quality and an action which corresponds to that quality is practiced by us. For example, someone is a generous person and an action like giving charity originates from that quality. However, it is also possible to have a person who acts generously but does not have the quality of generosity. Indeed, one way to acquire generosity is to act generously and by continuing to act in such way, generosity gradually becomes a habit and then a quality. Of course, if a person acts generously in a particular case, although they do not have generosity as a quality, this action still originates from their entire personality and so this means that they must have some other factors within them which have led to this action, but not necessarily a quality which is directly related to it. Or, for example, a person who is not brave has acted bravely in one particular case and so this action has not originated from bravery as a quality but from this person's entire personality. Therefore, there must be other factors which, when combined, produced this action.

It is important to note that, of course, in the end everything is filtered by our free will. A person may have all the good qualities or all the bad qualities and still does not decide to

act upon them. This is entirely another matter. However, there does need to be some kind of relationship between our qualities and our actions. As explained previously, whatever is in our soul somehow emerges in our words and actions, although not exactly or completely.

Another point that should be considered is that various thinkers, ethicists, or schools of *akhlāq* may define and understand what is good and what is bad in different ways. In reality, in many cases people agree on at least the main principles and values, but the details may differ. Occasionally, there may even be people who question some principles. However, this does not change the definition of the science of *akhlāq* because people's diverse understandings of virtues and vices have nothing to do with the definition of the science of *akhlāq*. In the science of *akhlāq* we study good qualities and bad qualities, and good actions and bad actions. For example, people may have different views about whether abortion is good or bad but it can still be said that the science of *akhlāq* is a science that deals with good and bad actions, and good and bad qualities. Therefore, it should not be concluded that since people may have different views about these values, then the science of *akhlāq* has to be defined differently.

### The Aim of the Science of *Akhlāq*

Furthermore, the fact that people belong to different schools of ethics does not mean that they do not all agree that we

should promote virtues and good actions. This is something which everyone accepts and tries to encourage. Therefore, it is possible to say that the aim of the science of *akhlāq,* or the aim of someone who studies it, is to promote good actions and virtues amongst human beings. Those actions and virtues can sometimes be on a more personal level and sometimes on a more social level. Some of the virtues which will be discussed later may relate to our relationship with God, our relationship with ourselves, our relationships with other people, or even our relationships with nature and the environment. These relationships can be very personal or very social, but in any case the aim of the science of *akhlāq* is to try to promote these values and virtues. As human beings, we aspire towards having individuals and communities that are governed by moral virtues. This is why throughout the centuries many people have reflected on and taught *akhlāq* and have written numerous books and essays on the subject.

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## Summary

1. The subject of the science of *akhlāq* is *khulq,* which is our moral character and refers to those qualities which are not physical. The science of *akhlāq* also deals with good and bad actions.

2. Morality can be used to refer to different things, such as the moral character of a person, a group, or a community; or

to a science which deals with moral character traits or moral actions, in which case it is very close to the Islamic science of *akhlāq*.

**3.** Ethics can mean morality as a science or it can mean moral philosophy as a science. The latter deals with the science of *akhlāq* as a subject. In other words, it tries to investigate the presuppositions, concepts, epistemology, and even the ontology of the science of *akhlāq*.

**4** As we are concerned with the Islamic science of *akhlāq*, it does not make much of a difference if we use the term "Islamic morality" or the term "Islamic ethics."

**5.** The Islamic science of *akhlāq* is responsible for studying moral virtues and how to achieve them, moral vices and how to remove them, and good and bad actions.

**6.** Only voluntary actions are studied in *akhlāq* because there should always be a role for human freedom and control.

**7.** Gex and Foulquie limit the science of morality to the study of behaviour.

**9.** Mullā Sadrā believes that the science of *akhlāq* is the science which deals with character traits and the actions which originate from them.

10. Ayatullāh Mutahharī: The science of *akhlāq* teaches us how to behave and how to be. The science of *akhlāq* is the science that deals with human character traits. In the science of *akhlāq* only the qualities that are possible to acquire or remove are discussed because the aim of this science is to help us to differentiate between virtues and vices and then to try to acquire virtues or strengthen those we already possess, and remove vices.

11. Actions originate from one's entire personality; however, this does not necessarily mean that they come from a directly related quality.

12. People's diverse understandings of virtues and vices have nothing to do with the definition of *akhlāq* which is to study good and bad qualities and actions.

13. The aim of the science of *akhlāq* or the aim of one who studies it is to promote good actions and virtues amongst human beings.

# Lesson Three:

# Significance of Morality in Islam

## Introduction

In the previous lesson we talked about the definition of the science of *akhlāq* or the science of Islamic morlaity and then we studied the aim of this science. In this lesson we will try to discover the ultimate aim of *akhlāq* and its importance. After this, in order to clarify the significance of *akhlāq,* we will study a related subject which is the dependence of belief on *akhlāq.*

## Ultimate Aim of Islamic Morality

To be able to understand the ultimate aim of Islamic morality (*akhlāq*), we should make ourselves aware of the distinction between two related yet different matters: the aim of the science of *akhlāq* and the aim of Islamic morality.

As is the case with the study of any subject matter, there should be an aim in studying the science of *akhlāq.* For example, when studying business, mathematics, economics, politics, or any other subject, there should be an aim which gives meaning to our study of that particular aspect of

reality. In the present case, we study good qualities (virtues) and bad qualities (vices) in order to improve ourselves and to become better people. We study good actions so that we can perform them and we study bad actions so that we make sure to avoid them. The idea is to acquire a better understanding, which would be followed bybetter performance. Of course, it is not the case that everyone who knows the science of *akhlāq* or even masters it is necessarily a good person. A person may know something and not implement it in his life. There are doctors who know better than anyone else the damage that smoking does to the body, yet they smoke even more than other people do. Therefore, knowing something does not necessarily mean that a person is practicing it. However, knowing something is at least a first step to implementing it. Furthermore, we cannot be expected to practice something without first knowing it.

In the science of *akhlāq* we learn everything we need to know about qualities and actions so that we can benefit from them in order to become better human beings. However, the aim of *akhlāq* and in a wider sense, spirituality, is not merely to know in theory but rather to actually achieve all those virtues and perform those good actions so that we can become a very good person who resembles God in the best way possible. Of course, we can never resemble God completely but we can acquire qualities which are liked by God and try to resemble Him as much as is possible for us as human beings. We are advised by the Prophet (s) to

"acquire those qualities that are available in God"[1] except for those which are directly related to His Lordship.

There are certain traits which are exclusive to God, like *kibrīyā'* (greatness), and we cannot resemble Him in such traits. Indeed, if we wanted to become like that we would be arrogant because this is a trait which is exclusive to God.[2] However, these are not the only traits of God. He is also Merciful, Forgiving, Grateful, Knowledgeable, Supporting, Providing security and Giving peace. These qualities of God indicate the level of perfection that is available to us, and so when we try to resemble God and get closer to Him it means that we are moving towards our own perfection. Therefore, a person who is interested in *akhlāq* not merely as a subject matter for academic studies but rather as a priority in their life, aims to be as good, as perfect, and as close to God as humanly possible. Moreover, it is not only ordinary people like us who are involved in this spiritual journey and practice of morality because in reality all prophets (a) were also involved in it.

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[1] *Rawḍah al-Muttaqīn fī Sharh Man Lāyahḍuruhu al-Faqīh,* vol. 1, p. 312. The original text is as follows:

روى عنه (ص): تَخَلَّقُوا بِأَخْلاقِ اللَّه

[2] *Irshād al-Qulūb ila al-Sawāb*, vol. 1, p. 189. It is narrated by the Prophet (s) that God says: "Greatness is my garment." The original text is as follows:

قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ (ص): إِنَّ اللَّهَ تَعَالَى يَقُولُ: الْكِبْرِيَاءُ رِدَائِي

## Importance of Morality in the Qur'an

Something very interesting in the Qur'an is the way in which God talks about the people with whom He is pleased. In the Qur'an we have examples in which God mentions people whom He praises. Of course, He also mentions people with whom He is not pleased such as Abū Lahab or Pharaoh. The people praised in the Qur'an can be our role models. For example, there are many verses in the Qur'an in which God talks about the prophets (a) in general or about some of them in particular. There is research published about the characteristics of the prophets (a) mentioned in the Qur'an which investigates how God describes Abraham (a), Ishmael (a), Moses (a), Jesus (a), Prophet Muhammad (s) and other prophets (a) when He praises them, and the important things which God mentions about them. In this way, each prophet (a) and every quality mentioned about him in the Qur'an has been recorded.[3] Interestingly, it was discovered that most of the things for which God praises these prophets (a) relate to *akhlāq*. For example, God refers to them as patient, truthful, or merciful.Sometimes it was found that these qualities were common to a few prophets (a) and sometimes a quality is mentioned only for one particular prophet (a), not necessarily because the others did not have it but perhaps because it was more obvious or more strongly manifested in the life of that prophet (a). When all of these

[3] Message of Thaqalayn, *Moral Characteristics of the Prophets: A Qur'anic Perspective*, vol 11, no. 1, Spring 2010

Qur'anic descriptions are combined, we realise that morality is the most emphasised aspect of the lives of the prophets (a). Furthermore, among the prophets (a) there are five who have received even more attention: Prophets Noah (a), Abraham (a), Moses (a), Jesus (a), and Muhammad (s). They are the prophets (a) whom we call *ulu al-'azm* (i.e. those of great determination).

In the Qur'an, God says:

فَاصْبِرْ كَمَا صَبَرَ أُولُوا الْعَزْمِ مِنَ الرُّسُلِ

*So be patient just as the resolute among the apostles were patient...* (46:35)

This shows the great significance of patience which is a very important moral quality and will be discussed later. Patience is considered to be the head of faith. If we imagine faith as a body that has different parts and organs, it will have patience as its head.[4]

Therefore, out of billions of human beings, 124,000 were chosen, and out of these, five in particular were chosen. Then God says that these are the people who were patient and we should be patient like them. This is a moral description. These people are called *ulu al-'azm,* so perhaps

[4] *Misbah al-Shari'ah*, p. 184. The original text is as follows:

قَالَ عَلِيٌّ (ع): الصَّبْرُ مِنَ الإِيمَانِ كَالرَّأْسِ مِنَ الْجَسَدِ

"Patience to faith is like the head to the body."

the reason they were able to remain patient is because they were people of determination. *'Aẓm* (determination) is a very fundamental quality. It includes having will power, being able to discover what is good, and then being determined to do it; not giving up, not compromising one's principles and ideals, and not resting until one has made sure one's goals have been achieved. When someone finds something to be true and right then if they have determination they will do their best to implement and achieve it. These five prophets (a) are not described as people of knowledge, even though they are knowledgeable. They are not described as people of bravery or anything similar to this. Instead, God places the most emphasis on their determination; this is why they are being singled out.

Interestingly, when it comes to Prophet Adam (a) God says: *and We did not find in him any determination.* (20:115)[5] Undoubtedly, he was a very good person and never disobeyed God in the sense that we normally use the term disobedience. When God says: *Adam disobeyed his Lord* (20:121)[6] it was not a legal or jurisprudential disobedience. He was in a kind of heaven similar to the eternal heaven of the Hereafter but not the same one, and in this heaven there

[5] The Arabic text is as follows:

وَلَمْ نَجِدْ لَهُ عَزْمًا

[6] The Arabic text is as follows:

وَعَصَىٰٓ ءَادَمُ رَبَّهُ

was no obligation. Therefore, our scholars say that according to some hadiths his action was *tark-e awlā,* meaning Prophet Adam (a) did something that was better to avoid doing and not that he committed an actual sin by doing a prohibited action which would mean he deserved to be punished by being sent to hell. Thus, the problem with Prophet Adam (a) was that he did not have determination. However, in contrast to Prophet Adam (a), those five prophets (a) who are prime examples of prophethood, are described by God as "people of determination."

Therefore, morality is something which makes a person very special in the eyes of God and makes a person able to get closer to Him and achieve the potential designed by God for human beings. We have infinite potential to become increasingly better and we can even precede angels. A human being who, despite having lower desires, appetites, and lusts, follows the instructions of God and reason, is better than the angels who do not have such desires. We can advance forever, without stopping, in striving to achieve perfection because the difference between us and God is infinite and therefore the chance for perfection is infinite. However, God forbid that we go backwards and downwards because we can also move infinitely and forever lower and

lower, thus becoming even lower than animals: "*They are like cattle; rather they are more astray* (7: 179)."[7]

### Morality as the Core

Morality is a journey from where we are at present to either the best and highest or lowest possible level for humanity. This is a journey in which our companions can be prophets (a), righteous people, and truthful people. God says:

> وَمَن يُطِعِ اللهَ وَالرَّسُولَ فَأُولَئِكَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ أَنعَمَ اللهُ عَلَيْهِم مِّنَ النَّبِيِّينَ وَالصِّدِّيقِينَ وَالشُّهَدَاءِ وَ الصَّالِحِينَ وَحَسُنَ أُولَئِكَ رَفِيقًا
>
> *Whoever obeys Allah and the Apostle they are with those whom Allah has blessed, including the prophets and the truthful, the martyrs and the righteous, and excellent companions are they!* (4:69)

So if we want to be on the right path and travel fast towards God, we should take these people as our companions. On the other hand, God forbid that instead we go downwards and take bad people as our friends, such as those with whom God is angry or those who are misguided.

Thus, the whole of life is a matter of struggling to become better or failing to undertake this struggle to become better. Certainly, we should equip ourselves with correct beliefs and

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[7] The Arabic text is as follows:

أُولَئِكَ كَالأَنْعَامِ بَلْ هُمْ أَضَلّ

proper practices along with morality, but these are not separate from moral enterprise and struggle. Indeed, if someone has no commitment to the truth or is not thoughtful or thankful, then how can they become a believer? Why do we believe? Is it not because we have concern for the truth? Is it not because we want to be humble before the truth? Is it not because we want to find out who has given us all these blessings so that we can be thankful to them? Is it not because we do not want to live a life of negligence and heedlessness? These are all moral qualities.

Why did Abū Dhar or Salmān embrace Islam while others did not accept Islam? There must be a reason for this and it is a moral reason. There must have been certain good qualities in Abū Dhar, Salmān, 'Ammār, Miqdād and others who believed, which led to their embrace of Islam. They were idol-worshippers or disbelievers in One God and yet they later changed. However, there were also other people who remained idol-worshippers and wanted to fight against the Prophet (s). What was the difference between them? The difference is something very fundamental. There may be two idol-worshippers but one of them may worship idols out of ignorance because they do not know the truth and have not been introduced to it. However, as soon as they come to know about the truth, and as soon as truth becomes available in their search for the truth, they believe in it

wholeheartedly. On the other hand, there are also people who insist on doing wrong.

Therefore, after careful thought and consideration, faith also appears to be something very much related to our moral character. This is why we find that in many verses in the Qur'an, God blames those who have decided not to become faithful. They could not be blamed if it was not a matter of their own choice, but from the Qur'an we realise that faith and disbelief are voluntary actions which require certain moral qualities. Therefore, we have to realise that morality is an issue which should be the focal point in our struggle to become a better person and to be as close to God as possible.

### Dependence of Belief on Morality

So far we have been discussing the significance of *akhlāq*. We have said that our struggle for perfection is very much a moral struggle. Although in addition to morality we have to make sure that we have correct beliefs and proper practices, these beliefs and practices are very much related to *akhlāq* and in a sense, dependent on it. Correct beliefs and practices in themselves can prepare us to become much better people and to observe morality in a better way; however, in order to accept the truth as our belief, we need to be moral to a certain extent in the first place. We have to at least have qualities such as truthfulness, thankfulness, and humility. If a

person is not truthful, thankful, or humble, they will not at all be concerned about having a belief system.

There have been people who knew the truth but did not believe in; to believe in something involves more than simply knowing it. In the Qur'an God says:

وَجَحَدُوا بِهَا وَاسْتَيْقَنَتْهَا أَنفُسُهُمْ ظُلْمًا وَعُلُوًّا فَانظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الْمُفْسِدِينَ

*And they denied them, though their souls acknowledge them wrongfully and out of pride: so see what was the end of those who acted corruptly!* (27:14)

This means that a person may know something but still reject it. For someone to believe means that they must accept, admit, and acknowledge what they know. Whilst it is true that we should endeavour to know, this is not sufficient. There were people who were very sure about the truth of Islam yet they did not believe in it. They knew that the Prophet (s) was honest; the Prophet (s) exhibited honesty – a very important moral quality – even before being appointed as a prophet. Indeed, he was known as *amin* (honest). Before and after the advent of Islam, if anyone was asked to identify the most honest person in Makkah, the answer was Muhammad (s). When the Prophet (s) wanted to migrate to Madinah thirteen years after the advent of Islam, he had in his possession many items that he had been entrusted with by the people of Makkah – the very same

people who were his enemies or did not believe in him; people who opposed him knew that he was so honest that they entrusted him with their goods. Indeed, they never witnessed anything bad from him during his entire lifetime. Thus, it was not that they did not have faith because they did not know; rather, they simply did not want to believe. Of course, some of them believed later on.

Therefore, certain good qualities need to be present in a person in order for them to believe, and the same is the case with being able to practice. There are people who do not practice by observing God's laws even if they believe, whether it's because they are lazy or because they are not determined enough or for some other reason. There are many different reasons for this and if we carefully and deeply examine these things, we will realise that all of the reasons are connected to a person's morality. Therefore, morality is a very important and fundamental matter.

In a very well-known hadith, Prophet Muhammad (s) said:

إِنَّمَا بُعِثْتُ لأُتَمِّمَ مَكَارِمَ الأَخْلاق

> Verily, I have been sent by God only to complete the noble traits of character. [8]

In this narration, the Prophet (s) used the word *innamā,* which means that he has mentioned an exclusive reason.[9]

[8] *Makārim al-Akhlāq,* p. 8

Thus, when the Prophet (s) mentioned *akhlāq* as the goal of his prophethood, he meant that if he pursued any other goal it was because it was related to *akhlāq*. The priority at the top of his agenda was to accomplish noble traits of character. Firstly, this shows that this was not a journey which he started but rather that he came to accomplish a mission which had already been started. Previous prophets had started this task and each and every one of them made efforts to take the people of their time a step further. However, the final Prophet (s) planned and implemented the final stage because no other prophet was going to be sent; he therefore had to provide humanity with all instructions necessary to achieve the highest levels of noble character traits.

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[9] In Arabic, *innamā* (إنّما) is different from *inna* (إنّ). *Inna* means 'truly' whilst *innamā* shows exclusiveness. In this narration, the Prophet (s) used the word *innamā* which means that the reason he mentioned is the exclusive reason. This exclusiveness is of two types: absolute and relative. For example, sometimes someone asks a person if they have seen Ali and Hasan and Husayn. The person replies by saying that they have only seen Ali. This does not mean that they have not seen any other human being; it is possible that they had seen many other people, but from amongst the people they were asked about, they had exclusively seen Ali. This is called relative exclusiveness (الحصر الاضافی). On the other hand, sometimes when someone says they have only met such-and-such a person, it means that they have only seen that person and no one else. This is absolute exclusiveness (الحصر الحقیقی). Thus, relative or absolute exclusiveness can be established according to the context and the evidence surrounding what a person says.

Furthermore, he did not say that he had come merely to teach *makārim al-akhlāq*; rather, he said that his mission was to complete and to accomplish noble character traits. He first achieved them in himself and then demonstrated them in practice through his words and actions. Therefore, the holy Prophet (s) did not just teach or preach; he practically showed people what they should do.

Another beautiful point is that the Prophet (s) said *makārim al-akhlāq* and not *mahāsin al-akhlāq*. There are good character traits and there are also noble character traits. Good character traits can be very general whereas noble ones are at the highest level of goodness. Examples of good character traits (*mahāsin al-akhlāq*) are: not harming people, not annoying anyone, not disregarding the rights of people, reciprocating good with good, and being kind to our parents when they become old. But these are not enough. So what does it actually mean when we say that the Prophet (s) came to accomplish noble character traits? In practice this means, for example, to visit those who have abandoned us.[10] We may have relatives who never visit or ask about us but we should still go and visit them. Maybe they did not visit us when we were ill but we should still visit them when they become ill, without even mentioning that we have done so. We should not even think that we are doing something

[10] *Misbāh al-Sharī'ah*, p. 159. The original text is as follows:
قَالَ النَّبِيُّ (ص) حَاكِياً عَنْ رَبِّهِ يَأْمُرُهُ بِهَذِهِ الْخِصَالِ قَالَ: صِلْ مَنْ قَطَعَكَ

important; we should simply go and do it. Or, for example, we should help the person who denied us help when we needed it.[11] Maybe when we were in need of money they did not help us even though we asked them to because we wanted to buy a house or we were trying to arrange for our son or daughter to be married. However, when they are in need of money we should go and help them if we are able to do so. Indeed, we should not even wait for them to come and ask us for help; we should go and offer it to them before they ask. This is what noble character traits consist of. We must not simply reciprocate the good things that we have received but rather we have to be the first to extend our love, mercy, and help to others.

Thus, we now have an idea of what the Prophet's mission was, as explained by the Prophet himself. In the Qur'an God says that he actually achieved this. Addressing the Prophet (s), God says:

وَ إِنَّکَ لَعَلیٰ خُلُقٍ عَظِیم

*and indeed you possess a great character.* (68:4)

We need to consider one further point in order to fully understand the very beautiful idea contained in this phrase. Being great or insignificant is a relative issue because we evaluate the greatness or insignificance of other things based

[11] *Misbāh al-Shari'ah,* p. 159. The original text is as follows:

أعْظِمْ مَنْ حَرَمَکَ

on how great or insignificant we ourselves are. For example, someone who is in secondary school appears to be very knowledgeable in the eyes of a person who has only attended primary school. However, for a person in secondary school, a university student seems to be very knowledgeable. Thus, it is a relative issue. If someone has only a small amount of money they will consider a person who has thousands of dollars to be very rich. However, for the one who has thousands of dollars, a person who has millions of dollars is seen as very rich. Therefore, when we consider God and all His greatness, everything else is insignificant in comparison. As God says in the Qur'an, this material world – with all its beautiful countries, jungles, rivers, gold mines, planets, and galaxies – is insignificant.[12]

Therefore, when such a Lord says that something is great, it means that it is definitely, absolutely great. When God says that the Prophet (s) has great character traits then this shows that according to God's expectations and standards, the Prophet's character was truly great. He achieved this in himself. But in addition to this, he had a mission to also establish this amongst his followers. Some people achieved this according to their capacity and others did not. The

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[12] The Qur'an, 9:38:

أَرَضِيتُم بِالْحَيَوةِ الدُّنْيَا مِنَ الآخِرَةِ فَمَا مَتَاعُ الْحَيَوةِ الدُّنْيَا فِى الآخِرَةِ إِلا قَلِيل

*Are you pleased with the life of this world instead of the Hereafter? But the wares of the life of this world compared with the Hereafter are but insignificant [little].*

achievement of this type of thing takes time. However, this world will not come to an end until and unless there are true followers of the Prophets (s), especially the last of them, who will achieve these most noble character traits. It is then that the mission of the Prophet (s), and indeed of all prophets (a), will be fulfilled.

God says that being concerned about justice and equity is one of the most important qualities that must be achieved by humanity, and that all prophets (a) were sent for this purpose:

لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنا رُسُلَنا بِالْبَيِّناتِ وَ أَنْزَلْنا مَعَهُمُ الْكِتابَ وَ الْمِيزانَ لِيَقُومَ النَّاسُ بِالْقِسْطِ

*Certainly We sent Our apostles with manifest proofs, and We sent down with them the Book and the Balance, so that mankind may maintain justice;* (57:25)

Indeed, this must be attained both as a character trait and as a practice. According to hadiths narrated by Sunnis and Shi'as alike, at the end of times when Imam Mahdi (a) comes, this level of justice and equity will be established.[13] At that time, all the prophets (a) will be pleased that their mission has been completed.

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[13] *Suman Abi Dâwūd,* vol. 4, kitab al-Mahdi. *al-Kâfi,* vol. 1, p. 338. The original text is as follows:

يَمْلأُ الأَرْضَ عَدْلاً وَ قِسْطاً كَمَا مُلِئَتْ جَوْرا

However, the Prophet of Islam's mission was such that it cannot be completed merely by the establishment of justice and equity. He aspires to something much greater and that is noble character traits. The establishment of justice and equity would prepare the grounds for humanity to be elevated even higher. Thus, justice is not the aim or end result because it is only when we have justice and social equity that we can then aspire to higher levels of perfection. In that situation, we can aspire to having humanity as a whole loving one another, being kind to each other, and not only reciprocating good but offering it in the first place without expectation.

We have a hadith which says that the people of Heaven and Earth will all be pleased with Imam Mahdi (a),[14] including even birds in the sky,[15] because Imam Mahdi (a) and his followers not only do not do any harm to anyone or anything (including even animals and plants), but they are so kind and merciful that they are also concerned about everyone and everything's goodness. According to some hadiths, Imam Mahdi (a) is like a queen bee with whom all bees take refuge.[16] It is only love that can satisfy people and

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[14] *al-Qibah (Tūsī)*, p. 178. The original text is as follows:
يَرْضَى عَنْهُ سَاكِنُ السَّمَاءِ وَ سَاكِنُ الأَرْضِ

[15] *Dalā'il al-Imāmah*, p. 441. The original text is as follows:
يَرْضَى بِخِلَافَتِهِ أَهْلُ السَّمَاءِ وَ الطَّيْرُ فِي الْجَوِّ

[16] *al-'Adad al-Qawīyah*, p. 91. The original text is as follows:

it is only mercy that can really please people. So this is what the Prophet (s) describes as his mission: "to complete noble character traits."

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**Summary**

1. In the science of *akhlāq* we learn everything we need to know about qualities and actions in order to become better human beings. However, the aim of *akhlāq* – and in a wider sense, spirituality – is not only to know in theory but to actually achieve all those virtues and perform those good actions so that we can become good people who resemble God in His qualities in the best way humanly possible.

2. According to the Qur'an, morality is the most emphasised aspect of the lives of the prophets (a).

3. Out of billions of human beings, 124,000 have been chosen as prophets (a) and out of these, five in particular were chosen (*ulu al-'azm*). God says that these five are the people who were patient. They are not described as people of knowledge – although they possessed this – nor people of bravery or anything similar to this; instead, God places the

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يَثُوبُ النَّاسُ إِلَيْهِ كَمَا تَثُوبُ الطَّيْرُ إِلَى أَوْكَارِهَا وَ كَمَا يَثُوبُ النَّحْلُ إِلَى يَعْسُوبِهَا

most emphasis on their determination, which is a moral quality.

4. Morality should be the focal point in our struggle to become a better person and to be as close to God as possible.

5. For someone to believe means that they must accept, admit, and acknowledge what they know to be true; thus, belief is more than simply knowing something. The reason some people believe in what they know to be true and others do not is rooted in their moral qualities. Therefore, faith and disbelief are voluntary actions that require certain moral qualities.

6. There is a very well-known hadith from Prophet Muhammad (s) in which he says: The only reason for which I have been appointed by God as a prophet is to accomplish noble character traits.

7. *Makārim al-akhlāq* (noble character traits) are different from *mahāsin al-akhlāq* (good character traits). Good character traits can be very general whereas noble ones are at the highest level of goodness.

8. According to the Qur'an, the Prophet (s) himself had achieved noble character traits but then he also had to establish them amongst his followers. The world will not come to an end unless these character traits are established,

after which the mission of Prophet Muhammad (s) and all other prophets (a) will be accomplished.

9. At the end of times, Imam Mahdi (a) will reappear and establish justice and equality amongst all people. However, this will not be the end of the Prophet's mission because when justice and social equality are established, it will be time for people to aspire to achieve noble character traits.

## Lesson Four:

## History of the Science of *Akhlāq*

### Introduction

Before starting to explain the moral teachings of Islam, it is important to review the history of the development of the science of *akhlāq* in Islam. In this lesson we will start with the Qur'an and the Prophet (s). After this we will examine the issue of morality in other Islamic sources which we have inherited from the Ahl al-Bayt (a), such as *Nahj al-Balāghah* and *al-Sahīfa al-Sajjādīyah*. We will also mention some of the most significant books on *akhlāq* written in the centuries after the time of the Prophet (s) and the Ahl al-Bayt (a).

### Development of the Science of *Akhlāq* in Islam

In the previous lesson we said that morality is very highly regarded in Islam and that Prophet Muhammad (s) described his mission as a mission for the accomplishment of noble traits of character:

إِنَّمَا بُعِثْتُ لأُتَمِّمَ مَكَارِمَ الأَخْلاق

> Verily, I have been sent by God only to complete the noble traits of character.[1]

We also said that when God introduces His chosen prophets (a), He mentions their moral character more than anything else. Therefore, morality is something which is extremely important in Islam and is something which occupies a very central, if not the most central, position in the Qur'an and in the sunnah of the Prophet (s) and Ahl al-Bayt (a).

Thus, it is hardly surprising that right from the beginning Muslims have paid attention to the study of *akhlāq*. Many essays and books have been written about *akhlāq* and a lot of research has been carried out on this topic. Of course, no matter how much we do, it will not be sufficient; however, it should be acknowledged that a great deal of good work has been done.

## The Qur'an

In order to study the history of the science of *akhlāq* in Islam, we have to start with the Qur'an and the Prophet (s). The Qur'an is the most important source for understanding Islamic ethics. It is full of moral teachings which do not only address Muslims since there are many teachings which address all human beings. Accordingly, we believe that even

[1] *Makārim al-Akhlāq*, p. 8

a person who is not religious would be able to understand and appreciate these fundamental moral values.

For example, it is not necessary to be a religious person to understand that justice is good and injustice is bad. It is not necessary to be a believer to understand that we should be kind to our parents, supportive of our children, and that we should not disregard the rights of other people. Thus, the Qur'an is full of moral teachings which are relevant to all human beings in general but with higher levels of expectation for the believers.

The contents of the Qur'an alone are sufficient to encourage its reader to be a moral person. It involves us so profoundly in moral discourse that we need to have a good understanding of morality. The Qur'an does not want us to act like robots or machines. It wants us to be moral thinkers; people who act with understanding and in a moral way.

Therefore, the Qur'an is a book that encourages us to contemplate over serious questions; it does not expect us to act without asking and understanding. Indeed, it requires us to understand. So not only is there no problem with asking, but the Qur'an says that we *should* be asking:

فاسْألوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِن كُنتُمْ لاتَعْلَمُون

*Ask the People of the Reminder if you do not know.* (21:7)

In some other religious traditions, asking questions can be taken as a sign of weakness because when there is a religious authority, one is expected to believe and act on what they say without questioning anything. However, in Islam it is quite the opposite. In order to respect the religion, and to respect God and the Prophet (s), it is imperative to understand why one is asked to do something, and if one does not know then one should ask. This quest for understanding is an act of worship. Not only is it not considered bad, but it is in fact obligatory. When someone does not know something, they must ask, study, and learn. Islam does not want people to be close-minded and short-sighted, or to easily accept or reject things without understanding why.

Of course, there are things that may be beyond our understanding or reach, but when we have a rational method to prove that a particular person,such as the Prophet (s), has authority, only then will they be accepted. However, first of all it must be proven rationally that he is a true prophet, that Islam is a true religion, and that the Qur'an really is a message from God. When this has been established, it is then possible to accept even the things which may be beyond one's reach; for example, issues regarding the hereafter and details which cannot be understood by using our reason.

However, there is no problem in wanting to understand. We should conduct extensive research and eventually, either a clear answer or explanation will be found or at least we will have realised that it is based on the authority of the Prophet (s); even though we do not have direct access to it, it is not something that goes against reason.

In Islam, there is nothing irrational and nothing that contradicts something else. It is never expected that one should have to accept something on the basis of "faith" even if it goes against reason. Everything in Islam is such that we have to be able to understand and accept it independently, or at the very least, we have to be able to argue for it in an indirect way. Certainly nothing that is either in contradiction with itself or is irrational can meet these requirements.

Therefore, the Qur'an is a book that encourages Muslims to consider serious questions about ethics. Two important questions are the question of justice and injustice, and the question of goodness and badness.

### Prophet Muhammad (s)

Prophet Muhammad (s) was himself primarily a moral figure. If we were to characterise his life using a single heading, we could describe his life as a moral life; it was a life filled with the fragrance of morality, so much so that in the Qur'an God says to the Prophet (s):

وَ إِنَّکَ لَعَلیٰ خُلُقٍ عَظِیم

*And indeed you possess a great character.* (68:4)

The Prophet (s) also expressed the significance of *akhlāq* in his words and in his teachings. Thus, many hadiths of the Prophet (s) are related to *akhlāq*.

**Imam Ali (a)**

Amongst the companions of the Prophet (s), Imam Ali (a) was the one who left a very rich heritage of morality and spirituality, so much so that no one who has knowledge of the early days of Islam and the companions of the Prophet (s) would have any doubt that amongst the followers and companions of the Prophet (s), Imam Ali (a) was the most knowledgeable as well as the most spiritual.

This is not only evident in Shi'a Islam but also in Sufi Islam. The majority of Sufis are not Shi'a but nevertheless they all believe that their genealogy goes back to the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (a), finally arriving at Imam Ali (a), and then through Imam Ali (a) they connect themselves to the Prophet (s). It is very rare to find a Sufi order which does not trace its genealogy back to Imam Ali (a).

In any case, there is no doubt that in his way of life and in his words, Imam Ali (a) represented the teachings of the Prophet (s) more than anyone else from amongst the companions of the Prophet (s). To understand this, it is

sufficient simply to study *Nahj al-Balāghah*, which is a collection of sermons, letters, and wise sayings containing only a fraction of all the sayings of Imam Ali (a). There are also many other books available such as *Ghurar al-Hikam* and *'Uyūn al-Hikam wa al-Mawa'idh* in which many wise moral sayings of Imam Ali (a) can be found.

In *Nahj al-Balāghah* we find such important questions and teachings on morality – in addition to philosophical and theological issues – that any serious reader would be very much encouraged to undertake a study of ethics. It is impossible to read *Nahj al-Balāghah* carefully and not be inspired to take morality seriously. Indeed, after reading it, one realises that one's whole life depends on taking morality seriously.

For example, in one of Imam Ali's letters addressed to his son, Imam al-Hasan (a), the Imam (a) gives such important moral advice that several books and commentaries have been written on this letter alone. Indeed, a Sunni scholar named Abu Ahmad Hasan b. 'Abdillah quotes this letter in his book *al-Zawājir wa al-Mawāiẓ* and says that if there is one piece of advice that needs to be written in gold, it is this letter of Imam Ali (a) to Imam al-Hasan (s). Of course, this is just one example amongst many others.

**Ahl al-Bayt (a)**

There is a collection of the sayings of the Prophet (s) called *Nahj al-Fasāhah* which was written after *Nahj al-Balāghah* in the 14th century (A.H.). The person who compiled it wanted to give it a name similar to that of *Nahj al-Balāghah* so he named it thus. However, prior to the 14th century, hadiths of the Prophet (s) can be found in the sayings of Imam Ali (a) in *Nahj al-Balāghah*, and in the sayings of Imam al-Hasan (a), Imam al-Husayn (a), Imam Zayn al-'Abidīn (a), and all other Imams (a).

It is well known that when the first three caliphs banned the narration of hadiths – because they believed that if people cared about hadiths, the Qur'an would be overshadowed – the followers of the Ahl al-Bayt (a) did not observe this ban and they continued to narrate the hadiths of the Prophet (s). Therefore, in the school of the Ahl al-Bayt (a), the hadiths of the Prophet (s) about *akhlāq* are found throughout the generations, going all the way back to the Prophet (s) himself. However, in the other schools of Islam, the ban was finally removed at the end of the first century by 'Omar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz who ruled from 99 to 101 (A.H.), near the end of the Umayyad period. The major collections of hadiths were mostly compiled and came into existence in the time of the 'Abbasīds. Unfortunately, this created a gap, whereas in the school of the Ahl al-Bayt (a) there is no such gap; generation after generation, the hadiths of the Prophet (s)

were narrated, recorded in writing, and passed on to the next generation.

Therefore, the teachings of the Prophet (s) and the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt (a) did not emerge only at the time when major collections of hadiths were compiled. They existed right from the beginning and, thanks to Allah (swt), today we can trace all of these hadiths back to the Prophet (s) or the Imams (a) of the Ahl al-Bayt (a). Even though it is now thirteen or fourteen centuries after the Prophet (s) and the Imams (a) lived (depending on which Imam (a) we are talking about), even today it is possible to verify all the people who have occurred in the chain of narrators. This is very important. It demonstrates the great attention paid by scholars to the preservation of these hadiths along with the chain of narrators so that people can themselves evaluate whether a particular chain is reliable or not.

Numerous hadiths of the Prophet (s) and of the Ahl al-Bayt (a) are full of inspirations about morality. Some of these moral narrations are collected in specific books such as *al-Sahīfa al-Sajjādīyah* of Imam Zayn al-'Abidīn (a). This particular book contains about 50 of his supplications. It has been translated into English at least twice. One such translation is entitled *The Psalms of Islam*, translated by William Chittick. It is a book on spirituality and morality; a vast and deep ocean of moral teachings.

In addition, there are many individual hadiths from the Prophet (s) and the Ahl al-Bayt (a) regarding morality which are not necessarily all gathered together in one book but are to be found in various collections of hadiths or in short essays.

### Collections of Hadiths

In our collections of hadiths such as *al-Kāfi*, we have many chapters and sections on morality and moral teachings. For instance, we have *Kitab al-'Ishrah* which is a chapter on social life, containing advice on how to be a good citizen, a good companion, a good neighbour, and a good friend. There is also a section on the characteristics of the believers (*Bāb al-Mu'min wa 'Alāmātihī wa Sifātihī*).

### Books on *Akhlāq*

We also have essays and books devoted to the subject of *akhlāq*. For example, among the companions of the Imam al-Riḍā (a), there was a person called Isma'īl b. Mihrān. He wrote a book called *Sifāt al-Mu'min wa al-Fājir*. This book is entirely about the moral characteristics of believers and sinners; it does not deal with, for example, history, jurisprudence, or other issues.

From the 3rd century (A.H.), we have a book called *al-Māni'āt min Dukhūl al-Jannah* or "Obstacles to Entering Heaven", which explains the things which can hinder entrance to heaven. This was compiled by Ja'far b. Ahmad al-Qummī.

We also have *Tuhaf al-'Uqūl*, a collection of hadiths which is mostly about ethics with reference to hadiths from previous prophets (a) and hadiths from Prophet Muhammad (s) and the Imams (a). It was compiled by Ibn Shu'bah Harrānī.

From the 4th century (A.H.), we have a book called *al-Ādāb wa al-Makārim al-Akhlāq* which was written by Abu al-Qasim al-Kūfī about noble traits of character. In the same century, we have the book *al-Sa'ādah wa al-Is'ād* by Abu al-Hasan Muhammad b. Yūsuf al-'Āmirī about happiness and the way to attain it.

From the 5th century (A.H.), there is *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq wa Tathīr al-A'rāq* by Ibn Miskawayh, which is about morality.

From the 6th century (A.H.), we have a major book called *Ihyā' al-'Ulūm al-Dīn* written in Arabic by al-Ghazālī, a very famous Sunni scholar who wrote several volumes on ethics and issues related to ethics. The title of the book means "The Revival of Religious Sciences." He also has another book called *Kīmīyaye Sa'ādat* or "Alchemy of Happiness" which was written in Farsi. It aims to teach us how to achieve happiness and salvation.

There is another important book about moral teachings written in the 6th century called *Tanbīh al-Khawātir wa Nuzhat al-Nāẓir* – also known as *Majmū'eye Warrām* – written by Warrām b. Abi Farās. In this century, we also have *Makārim al-Akhlāq* written by Hasan b. Faḍl Tabarsī.

From the 7th century (A.H.) we have a great scholar called Khājeh Nasīr al-Dīn Tūsī[2] who was a distinguished philosopher, astronomer, mathematician, and theologian, as well as an eminent master of ethics. He has a book called *Akhlāq-e-Nāserī* and another called *Awsāf al-Ashrāf* meaning "Characteristics of the Noble." The latter is a book that describes different qualities and characteristics according to the stages a wayfarer experiences while passing through the different stations of mysticism. This is a very interesting book which is related to practical mysticism or practical spirituality.

From the 8th century (A.H.), we have *Akhlāq al-Ashrāf* which was written by Khājeh Nizām al-Dīn 'Ubayd Zākānī.

From the 10th century (A.H.), we have two important books called *Akhlāq-e-Shamsī* and *Akhlāq-e-Kāshifī*. *Akhlāq-e-Shamsī* is by Mawlā Hasan b. Rūzbahān Shīrazī and *Akhlāq-e-Kāshifī* is by Hasan b. Ali Kāshifī.

From the 11th century (A.H.) we have many great and important figures, one of which is Mullā Mohsin Fayḍ Kāshānī. He has many books on hadiths, exegesis, theology, and *akhlāq*. One of his most important works on *akhlāq* is *al-*

[2]Not to be confused with Shaykh Tūsī, known as Shaykh al-Tā'ifah, who lived earlier and was a great muhaddith. He was the author of *Tahdhīb al-Ahkām* and *al-Istibsār* which are two of the four major Shi'a collections of hadiths. He was also a jurist and wrote a very good commentary on the Qur'an called *al-Tibyān*.

*Mahajjah al-Bayḍā' fī Tahdhīb al-Ihyā'*. He very much liked the book *Ihyā' al-'Ulūm al-Dīn* by al-Ghazālī but found that it needed some improvements, so he added hadiths from the Ahl al-Bayt (a) and removed any narrations which did not have strong supporting evidence. He also tried to add some other important things which were missing in *Ihyā' al-'Ulūm al-Dīn*. He compiled *Mahajjah al-Bayḍā' fī Tahdhīb al-Ihyā'* in eight volumes, but the latest edition is published in four volumes with eight parts.

From the 12th century (A.H.) we have a very important book called *Jāmi' al-Sa'ādāt* by Mullā Mahdī Narāqī, written in Arabic in three volumes. It is a very detailed book on ethics and contains plenty of references from the Qur'an and hadiths. However, at the same time it follows a form of philosophical or Aristotelian approach to ethics and therefore classifies moral virtues and vices according to the faculties of human beings: the faculty of reason (*al-quwwah al-nātiqah or al-'aqlīyah*), the faculty of anger (*al-quwwah al-ghaḍabīyah*), and the faculty of appetite (*al-quwwah al-shahawīyah*). The book discusses the golden mean or the balanced position which we should aim to achieve for each faculty.

After Mullā Mahdī Narāqī, we have Mullā Ahmad Narāqī who wrote the book *Mi'rāj al-Sa'ādah*. *Jāmi' al-Sa'ādāt* is more detailed and is written in three volumes in Arabic, whilst *Mi'rāj al-Sa'ādah* is written in Farsi in one volume. Both

books have received great attention. Recently, Dr. Jalal al-Dīn Mujtabawī has translated the three volumes of *Jāmi' al-Sa'ādāt* into Farsi. He also summarised them into one volume. Some years ago a very brief summary of *Jāmi'al-Sa'ādāt* was translated into English and it contains about a twentieth of the original book in Arabic.

From the 14th century, books like *Tuhaf al-'Uqūl* and *Makārim al-Akhlāq* are frequently republished and reprinted. They are available in any significant library.

From the 14th century, thanks to God, we have many great books on *akhlāq* and also some developments in the study of *akhlāq* which we will discuss in the next lesson.

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**Summary**

1. Morality occupies a very central, if not *the* central, position in the Qur'an, in hadiths, and in the sunnah of the Prophet (s) and the Ahl al-Bayt (a). As a result, morality became very important for all Muslims, from the first generation onto succeeding generations.

2. A study of the history of the science of *akhlāq* in Islam must begin with the Qur'an and the Prophet (s).

3. The Qur'an does not want people to act like robots or machines. It wants people to be moral thinkers and people

who do things with understanding. Unlike some other religious traditions, Islam encourages us to ask questions and think about matters related to religion.

4. Among the companions of the Prophet (s), Imam Ali (a) was the one who left a very rich heritage of morality and spirituality.

5. In *Nahj al-Balāghah* one finds such important questions and teachings on morality that any serious reader would be very much encouraged to undertake a study of ethics.

6. In the school of the Ahl al-Bayt (a), generation by generation, the hadiths of the Prophet (s) were narrated, recorded in writing, and passed on to the next generation.

7. The hadiths of the Prophet (s) and the Ahl al-Bayt (a) which are reported to us are full of moral inspirations.

8. Today we are able to verify all of the people who are mentioned in the chain of narrators. This demonstrates the great attention paid by scholars to the preservation of the hadiths along with the chain of narrators so that people can themselves evaluate whether a particular chain is reliable or not.

9. Since Muslims have always attached great importance to the subject of morality, many collections of hadiths, and many books and essays on morality and spirituality, have

been produced in the Islamic world. Some of the most important examples have been listed.

# Lesson Five:

# Recent Developments

## Introduction

In the previous lesson, we talked about the development of the science of *akhlāq* in the Islamic world and then we promised to focus on the contemporary age.

As mentioned before, ethics has always received great attention from Muslims in general and Muslim scholars in particular. However, in contemporary times, the science of *akhlāq* has received even more attention because morality has become increasingly important. The further we are from the early days of Islam, the closer we come to the end of times, and so our need for morality is greater. So many challenges, old and new, emerge each and every day that we will not be able to cope with them unless we are equipped with morality. Of course, by this we mean morality in its comprehensive sense, not merely morality with respect to, for example, our behaviour with others. As will be explained later, morality includes such aspects as our behaviour towards ourselves, towards God, towards others, or indeed towards the environment. It can be observed that due to the development of Islamic sciences and because some people

have now started to specialise in different fields of Islamic studies, more academic work has been done on morality and related subjects such as moral philosophy. Therefore, in this lesson we present a brief report on what has happened in the last few decades until now. As you will see, the major part of this development started and is happening in the Shi'a seminaries in general and in the Islamic seminaries of Qum in particular.

## Teaching *Akhlāq* in the Seminaries

Here, practical *akhlāq* and theoretical *akhlāq* should be distinguished from one another. What is meant by the former is the seminarians' efforts to purify themselves while the latter deals with the steps taken in Shi'a seminaries to study *akhlāq* as an independent field of study. Each will be discussed separately.

### Practical Ethics in Shi'a Seminaries

In the Shi'a seminaries, the teaching and practice of morality have always been highly regarded. Taking morality into consideration is an indispensable part of life in the seminaries where knowledge is not looked upon as the main goal; rather, it is seen as a means for purification, for attracting God's pleasure, and for serving people for the sake of God. Teachers in the seminaries always place great emphasis on the fact that attending the seminary must be done with pure intention and the seminarians should

maintain this intention throughout their lifetime in the seminary. In order for them to reach this goal, the seminarians have to constantly ponder over morality and spirituality. In Shi'a seminaries it is taken for granted that learning without self-purification is detrimental. Although helping other people to purify themselves is counted amongst the numerous duties of a seminarian, as a prerequisite, they are expected to have already purified themselves. The students of the seminaries always keep this narration in mind:

مَنْ تَعَلَّمَ الْعِلْمَ وَ عَمِلَ بِهِ وَ عَلَّمَ لِلَّهِ دُعِيَ فِي مَلَكُوتِ السَّمَاوَاتِ عَظِيما

Whoever learns for the sake of God, practices for the sake of God. and then teaches for the sake of God, would be held in high esteem in the kingdom of God.[1]

In addition to the importance of morality in the seminarians' way of life, it is believed that spirituality and piety are of considerable influence in the process of learning. From the viewpoint of the seminarians, this process is only partly dependent on attending classes, engaging in discussions, reading, and so on; a great part of it is attained when the student reaches divine guidance through spirituality. In a well-known hadith, Imam al-Sādiq (a) says:

[1] *al-Kāfi*, vol. 1, p. 35

لَيْسَ الْعِلْمُ بِالتَّعَلُّمِ إِنَّمَا هُوَ نُورٌ يَقَعُ فِي قَلْبِ مَنْ يُرِيدُ اللهُ أَنْ يَهْدِيَه

> Knowledge is not only a matter of teaching and learning; rather, it is a light which dwells in the heart of those people whom God wills to guide.[2]

Although learning by attending classes and discussions is a necessary step, it is not the end of the story; one should do one's best to gain divine guidance as well.

Due to the significance of morality for seminarians, several methods are followed in all Shi'a seminaries, three of which are of utmost importance:

1. The lecturers in the seminaries, irrespective of their field of teaching – whether theology, jurisprudence, philosophy exegesis and so on – generally begin or end their session with moral advice, on a daily or weekly basis.

2. In every seminary there is a weekly session in which most of the seminarians take part. Seminarians benefit from ethical lectures given by great scholars and mystics in order to improve their morality. In the Islamic seminary of Qum and some other cities, thanks to the presence of a great

[2] *Munyat al-Murīd,* p. 149

number of scholars and mystics, numerous meetings of this type are held weekly.

3. Aside from the above-mentioned general classes on morality, some of the great mystics choose a select group of well-qualified pupils in order to train them for spiritual wayfaring.

**Theoretical Ethics in Shi'a Seminaries**

Introducing ethics as an independent field of study in the Islamic seminary of Qum is a new and very significant step in Iran. In the seminaries of Qum, developments in this regard have been momentous in the last few decades. Several journals on ethics have been published, many dissertations have been compiled on the subject, and numerous projects on ethics have been undertaken. Interestingly, inspired by the steps taken by the seminaries of Qum, some of the universities in Iran have followed the seminary's example in the above-mentioned ways.

What follows is a short account of these developments in five spheres: fields of study, journals, dissertations, projects, and books:

**Fields of Study**

As mentioned earlier, the Islamic seminaries of Qum took the first step in the establishment of an independent discipline on ethics and consequently, several fields were

introduced in numerous seminaries and universities. Among the various courses held on ethics, one may refer to following:

1. A master's course in training spiritual mentors was launched in 2002 in the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute.

2. A master's course on Islamic Spirituality was launched in the International Section of Jāmi'at al-Zahrā (a)[3] in 2002. This course was the first of its kind in Iran. The curriculum was designed by myself and approved by the relevant authorities at Jāmi'at al-Zahrā (a).

3. After the successful experience in Jāmi'at al-Zahrā (a), I proposed a similar course to the University of Payām-e-Nūr.[4] The University welcomed this idea and obtained permission from the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education to offer two masters courses on moral philosophy and Islamic ethics from 2004. The curriculum was designed by Dr. Muhsin Javādī, Dr. Hamīd Shahrīārī, and myself.

4. Afterwards, at the suggestion of Dr. Javādī and myself, the organization for Islamic Seminaries Abroad[5], started a

[3] Jāmi'at al-Zahrā (a) is the largest seminary for Shi'a women in the world.

[4] The University of Payām-e-Nūr is the Iranian equivalent of the Open University in the UK.

[5] Later incorporated into the International Jāmi'at al-Mustafā (s).

distance learning course on Islamic ethics at the masters level in 2005. Until now, 200 students have completed this course and more than 90% of them have submitted their dissertations.

5. In 2008, the University of Qum obtained permission from the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education to offer the same courses designed for the Payām-e-Nūr University (i.e. the master's courses on moral philosophy and Islamic ethics).

Now the master's in Islamic ethics programme is running in Jāmi'at al-Zahrā (a), Payām-e-Nūr University, al-Mustafā University, and other universities such as the University of Allamāh Tabātabā'ī in Tehran and the University of Qum.

6. A third level course[6] on moral philosophy for seminarians was approved by the main body in charge of the Islamic seminaries of Qum in 2009.

7. A PhD course on moral philosophy in the University of Qum commenced in the academic year 2010-2011.

8. A PhD course on comparative moral philosophy has been approved at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute, where all the students are seminarians. It is

[6] Equivalent to masters level.

presently awaiting validation by the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education.

9. Another important development has taken place in the University of Ma'ārif which is an institution that mostly trains lecturers who can teach general subjects in universities. In the Iranian higher education system, every bachelor's degree student also studies certain general topics. For example, they take Islamic thought (ma'ārif), Islamic ethics, Farsi literature, physical exercise, and English as general studies. So the University of Ma'ārif offers programmes on Islamic theology and ethics and thus we now have people who are studying ethics in these programmes at the masters or PhD level and who write their thesis or dissertation on ethics.

Thus, at the present time there are many programmes at the masters or PhD level in which students study Islamic ethics, moral philosophy, or comparative ethics.

Of course, studying *akhlāq* is merely one step towards establishing moral virtues in society. We do not necessarily become better people simply by studying and teaching *akhlāq,* but it is hoped that it can at least facilitate the process; when people are more aware and more educated, there is greater hope that they will become more spiritual and act morally.

**Journals**

Up until a few years ago, there did not exist any journal specifically dedicated to morality and ethics, although one could find some moral issues discussed in various journals on Islamic studies. Today, however, there are several journals specifically on Islamic ethics, moral philosophy or applied ethics such as:

1. *Pazhuheshhāy-e-Akhlāqī* (Ethical Enquiries), a quarterly journal published by the University of Mā'arif. The first edition of this journal was issued in 2009.

2. *Ma'rifat-e-Akhlāqī* (Ethical Knowledge), a quarterly journal published by the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute. The first edition of this journal was issued in the winter of 2009 comprising 204 pages including abstracts in English.

3. *Akhlāq* (Morality), a quarterly journal dedicated to spirituality which is published by the Office for Islamic Propagation of Seminaries in Isfahan. The first edition was issued in the autumn of 2005. So far 15 issues have been published.

4. *Akhlāq-e-Pezeshkī* (Medical Ethics), published seasonally by the University of Shahīd Beheshtī in Tehran. Some of the seminarians such as Dr. Mustafā Muhaqqiq Dāmād have key

roles in the publication of this journal. The first edition was published in the autumn of 2007.

5. *Akhlāq wa Tārīkh-e-Pezeshkī* (History and Ethics of Medicine), published by the Tehran University of Medical Sciences. The first edition of this quarterly journal was issued in the winter of 2007. The tenth edition was published in the spring of 2010.

6. *Khulnq* (Moral Traits of Character) is published every two months by one research centre in Qum. The first issue was published in the autumn of 2007 and so far sixteen issues have been published.

7. *Akhlāq Pazhūhī* (Ethical Studies), an e-journal on Islamic morality and spirituality published by Jāmi'at al-Zahrā (a). This is a quarterly which started in the winter of 2008. So far, seven issues have been published online.

8. There is also an electronic encyclopaedia on morality and spirituality on the website of the Centre for Computing Islamic Sciences in Qum which contains 1,647 entries on ethics and 452 entries on mysticism.

**Dissertations**

Many dissertations and theses for the third and fourth levels[7] of the Islamic seminaries of Qum and Jāmi'at al-Zahrā (a)

[7] Equivalent to M.A. and PhD

have been written on ethics. One of the official websites of the Islamic seminaries of Qum has registered 82 dissertations on different aspects of morality and ethics, among which one may refer to the following: *Status of Morality in the Holy Qur'an, Status of Morality in Shi'a Narrations, Moral Concepts and Values in the Holy Qur'an, Moral Concepts and Values in Narrations, Applied Ethics, Moral Philosophy, The Relationship between Morality and Politics, The Relationship between Morality and Jurisprudence, The Relationship between Morality and Religion, Comparative Study of Ethics, Epistemology of Moral Values and Concepts, Sexual Ethics in Islam, Environmental Ethics in Islam,* and *Management Ethics in Islam.*

The official website of Jāmi'at al-Zahrā (a) has also registered fifty dissertations on various issues in ethics such as: *Moral Values and Concepts in the Holy Qur'an and Narrations, Inter-religious Ethics, Economic Ethics, Social Ethics, Moral Philosophy, Mysticism, The Relationship between Morality and Education, The Relationship between Morality and Development,* and *The Relationship between Morality and Mysticism*

**Projects**

Various research projects are being carried out in some of the research institutes and seminaries in Qum, such as:

1. The Imam Khomeinī Education & Research Institute is working on an encyclopaedia on applied ethics from an Islamic perspective.

2. The Research Institute for Islamic Culture and Thought[8] is working on an encyclopaedia on prophetic teachings and the practice of morality (*Dānish Name-ye Sīre-ye Nabawī*). It comprises several volumes and will be published in the near future.

3. The Office for the Islamic Propagation of Seminaries of Qum has many ongoing projects on Islamic ethics and applied ethics. For example, they have published a book entitled *Kitāb Shenākht-e Akhlāq-e Islami* which is a detailed bibliography of texts on Islamic ethics. This is a very helpful source as it includes reviews of all books written on Islamic ethics, along with an analysis of the writer's method and the advantages and disadvantages of each book. They have also published other books, including a volume on applied ethics.

Thus, it can be seen that great attention is being paid to *akhlāq* at the moment. Many good and useful projects are finished or are going to be finished soon, God willing, and many will continue for years. We also need to launch new projects and try to reach a point where we have a very systematic and methodological account of Islamic morality with all of its prerequisites, such as meta-ethical questions on ontology, epistemology, and logic of ethics.

[8] Pazhūhishgāh-e-Farhang wa Andīshe-ye Islamī

**Books**

There are also some excellent books on morality authored by great scholars. The following is a list of some of them:

1) The late Ayatullāh Khomeinī has written several books on ethics. A very famous one is *Chehel Hadīth* (Forty Hadiths) in which he has not only mentioned the hadiths but has also explained and analysed them. It is a very good book which is used as a textbook in many places.[9]

He has also written a book which is a commentary on the hadith about the armies of intellect and ignorance, *Sharh-e Hadith-e Junūd-e 'Aql wa Jahl.* This hadith is in *al-Kāfi*[10] and explains that there are two armies: the army of ignorance

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[9] According to several hadiths from Prophet Muhammad (s), whoever memorises 40 hadiths which benefit them in this life would be raised by Allah (swt) on the Day of Judgment as a knowledgeable person. The Prophet (s) is quoted as saying:

مَنْ حَفِظَ مِنْ أُمَّتِي أَرْبَعِينَ حَدِيثاً مِمَّا يَحْتَاجُونَ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ أَمْرِ دِينِهِمْ بَعَثَهُ اللهُ عَزَّ وَ جَلَّ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ فَقِيهاً عَالِماً

Whoever from my people memorises forty hadiths that they need in matters related to their religion, God Most High will revive him as a scholar and a knowledgeable person on the Day of Judgment. *Thawāb al-A'māl wa 'Iqāb al-'Amāl,* p. 134

Therefore, there has been a custom amongst scholars to compile selections of 40 hadiths.

[10] *al-Kāfi,* vol. 1, pp. 20-23

and the army of intellect, each one having its own soldiers. The hadith contrasts the soldiers of these two armies.

2) The late Allāmah Tabātabā'i wrote *al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'an* in twenty volumes in Arabic. It is perhaps the best commentary on the Qur'an and contains numerous beautiful and informative discussions on ethics.

3) The late Ayatullāh Mutahharī has authored many works related to morality, including books and collections of his lectures published as books such as *Dah Goftār* (Ten Lectures), *Bīst Goftār* (Twenty Lectures), and *Goftārhaye Ma'navī* (Spiritual Lectures) which include his lectures on morality. His book *Seiry dar Nahj al-Balāghah* (An Introduction to *Nahj al-Balāghah*) contains discussions about morality as does his *Āshnāei bā 'Ulūm-e Islami* (Introduction to Islamic Sciences). There is also another series of his lectures on the philosophy of morality which has been published separately. He has also written a book about the most perfect man, entitled *Insān-e Kāmel.*

4) Grand Ayatullāh Nāsir Makārim Shirāzī talks about *akhlāq* in his commentary on the Qur'an, *Tafsīr-e Nemūneh,* and in other books, but in particular he has authored two volumes entitled *Akhlāq dar Qur'an* (Morality in the Qur'an) which are dedicated to the study of *akhlāq.*

5) Grand Ayatullāh Ja'far Subhānī has discussions on *akhlāq* in his *Tafsīr-e Mawḍu'ī* (Thematic Interpretation of the

Qur'an). He also has a commentary of the Chapter *al-Hujurāt* which is related to *akhlāq*.

6) Ayatullāh Mesbāh Yazdī has written many books on *akhlāq* and many commentaries on different hadiths from the Prophet (s) such as *Rāhīān Kūye Dūst,* which is a commentary on the hadith of *mi'rāj,* and *Rah Tūsheh,* which is a commentary on the Prophet's (s) hadith to Abū Dhar. Both are all full of moral lessons. However, particular reference can be made to his book *Akhlāq dar Qur'an*, written in three volumes, in which the major issues in Islamic morality are studied. He also has two other books on philosophical ethics. One is *Falsafeh-ye Akhlāq*, which is mainly about meta-ethics, and the other is *Makāteb-e Akhlāqī* (Moral Schools of Thought), which is mainly about normative ethics.

7) Ayatullāh Javādī Amulī has written many books about *akhlāq* and Qur'anic ideas on *akhlāq*. Particular reference should be made to two books: *Mabādī-e Akhlāq dar Qur'an* and *Marāhel-e Akhlāqi dar Qur'an,* which are a combination of Qur'anic studies together with philosophical discussions on ethics. The former is about the principles and foundations of morality according to the Qur'an and the latter is about the stages of morality according to the Qur'an.[11]

[11] Thanks to God translations of works by both Ayatullāh Nāsir Makārim Shirāzī and Ayatullāh Javādī Amulī are now being published as

By virtue of the above activities, many people now specialise in ethics and many books are published in Iran regarding theoretical and applied ethics. Ethics, with its various branches, is now considered an independent field of study and research in Iran.

This attention to morality must become apparent in every aspect of Muslim life, including the academic sphere. Of course this is only one small step in the right direction because moral virtues should not merely be the subject of thought and discussion but should also be present, shared, and exhibited in society, God willing. Therefore, it is hoped that soon the science of ethics would achieve the level of recognition it deserves.

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## Summary

1. Ethics has always received great attention from Muslims in general and Muslim scholars in particular. However, perhaps one can say that in contemporary times, it has received even more attention because the need for morality has become increasingly important.

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series in a new bi-annual journal in English called Spiritual Quest which has been established by the International Institute for Islamic Studies. All articles in this journal are related to Islamic morality and spirituality.

2. Due to the development of Islamic sciences and because people have started to specialise in different fields of Islamic studies in recent years, more academic work has been done on morality and related subjects such as moral philosophy.

3. There has always been a tradition of teaching *akhlāq* and related subjects in the Islamic seminaries, but in the past, *akhlāq* was not studied as a discipline and as a separate field of study.

4. Now there are courses and programmes which focus entirely on ethics running in Jāmi'at al-Zahrā (a), the Islamic seminaries of Qum, Payām-e-Nūr University, Al-Mustafā (s) University and also in other universities such as the University of Allamāh Tabātabā'ī in Tehran and the University of Qum.

5. There have been many developments in the field of moral studies in recent years: the emergence of journals devoted to the specialised study of ethics, useful dissertations on ethical subjects, and the publication of encyclopaedias and very good books on morality written by great scholars.

# Lesson Six:

# Islamic Theory of Ethics

## Introduction

Although Islamic moral philosophy is not studied in this book, it is nonetheless important to have some idea about the Islamic ethical theory so that the Islamic approach to ethics is known. In doing so it will be understood why certain qualities and actions are regarded as virtues or good actions. Of course, these issues are studied in more detail in books on Islamic moral philosophy or Islamic philosophical theory of ethics.

## I. Importance of Both Actions and Qualities

From an Islamic point of view, we must pay attention to both voluntary actions and qualities which are not fixed and can be changed. This was discussed in detail previously.

## II. Importance of Intention

From an Islamic perspective, actions alone are not valuable and it is only when accompanied by good intentions that they become valuable. Therefore, thinkers like Kant are correct in saying that intention is very important. There are

many hadiths in our sources and many verses in the Qur'an from which the importance of intention can be understood. A particular action could be counted as either good or bad depending on the intention behind it. For instance, daily prayers can be performed solely for the sake of God or instead to show off to people and gain their admiration. Thus, the very same action which could help us and elevate us a step higher, can be destructive when done with bad intentions.

This is why we read in hadiths that "the intention is the foundation of an action"[1] or "action depends on intentions and what each person receives is according to their intention."[2] Therefore, actions are to be evaluated according to intention and not merely according to physical action. This is why in Islam both actions and intentions are important.

A person should not think that since their intentions are good, any action they perform is necessarily going to be good. There are many people with good intentions who unintentionally do damage because their actions are not good. Therefore, in Islam both *husn-e fi'lī* (goodness of the

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[1] *'Uyūn al-Hikam wa al-Mawa'idh,* p. 29. The original text is as follows:
امام علی (ع): النِّيَّةُ أَسَاسُ الْعَمَل

[2] *Misbah al-Shari'ah,* p. 53. The original text is as follows:
قَالَ رسول الله (ص): إِنَّمَا الأَعْمَالُ بِالنِّيَّاتِ وَ لِكُلِّ امْرِئٍ مَا نَوَى

action) and *husn-e fa'ilī* (goodness of the agent) are necessary. "Goodness of the action" means that in and of itself the action must lead to good outcomes, and "goodness of the agent" means that the doer of the action must also have good intentions.

Although scholars such as Kant also believed that actions must be performed out of moral responsibility, which is in a way the same thing as good intention, according to Islamic ethicists goodness of the agent has many aspects.

First of all, the agent must understand what they are doing. An action done while the agent is not in a conscious state or awake is not considered moral even if the action is in itself good. A moral action is when someone decides to do something and does it with understanding.

Furthermore, it is entirely possible that a person who has a bad intention performs actions which result in good outcomes. In this case, the agent will not be credited for those good outcomes which were not intended. The same can also be true of a person who is doing an action with good intentions because there is a hierarchy of good intentions. To illustrate this, let us consider the example of helping people which by itself is a good action. If this action is performed without any good intention then there will be no credit for the agent. However, as soon as good intentions arise, the action becomes valuable, but the value of the

action may vary according to the level of goodness of the intention. If it is done in order to bring good to the life of certain people, it will be valuable. However if it is done to please God through serving His servants, the intention is more valuable and so the action becomes better and the agent gains credit which the one who only did it out of sympathy for people will not receive. The value of an action can also vary depending on how strong the agent is in their moral character or in their faith.

Sometimes two people perform a similar action – like performing the morning prayer – but their intention and understanding is different, which causes their prayers to be different. Sometimes the intention of a person is so pure that God allocates verses of His Qur'an to telling the story of it. For example, on one occasion the members of the family of Prophet (s), the Ahl al-Bayt (a), fasted for three consecutive days and every evening as they were about to break their fast a person would come to their door asking for help. On the first day it was a needy person, on the second an orphan, and on the third a captive who went to them and asked for food. The family offered them all the food they had and were left with no food with which to break their fast. God loved this action so much that He revealed some verses about this incident in Chapter *Insān*:

وَ يُطعِمُونَ الطَّعَامَ عَلىَ حُبِّهِ مِسكِينًا وَ يَتِيمًا وَ أَسِيرًا إِنَّما نُطعِمُكُمْ لِوَجْهِ اللهِ لانُرِيدُ مِنكُمْ جَزَاءً وَ لاشُكُورًا

*They give food, for the love of Him, to the needy, the orphan and the prisoner, saying, "We feed you only for the sake of Allah. We do not want any reward from you nor any thanks."* (76:8-9)

God found this honest and sincere act so worthy that He praised it in the Qur'an and it will therefore remain alive forever in the memory of mankind. Many people have given away food but they are not all listed and registered in history. However, these members of the Ahl al-Bayt (a) had so much sincerity and purity in their intention that God decided to create a memory of this event which cannot be forgotten since it is preserved in the final message of God, the Qur'an.

Another example is the following story about Imam Ali (a). Imam Ali (a) was praying in the masjid and whilst he was in the state of *rukū'*, a needy person entered the masjid and started asking people for help. However, no one helped him. Then Imam Ali (a) stretched out his hand towards the needy person indicating to him that he should come and take the ring from Imam Ali's finger. It was then that God revealed the following verse:

إِنَّمَا وَلِيُّكُمُ اللهُ وَ رَسُولُهُ وَ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَوةَ وَ يُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَوةَ وَ هُمْ رَاكِعُون

*Your guardian is only Allah, His Apostle, and the faithful who maintain the prayer and give the zakat while bowing down.* (5:55)

Thus, it can be understood from the above quoted verses that the intention behind an action plays a very important role in the value of that action.

However, at the same time the action is also important. It is not acceptable to say that someone's intention is very good and therefore they are allowed to do anything they like. There are people who have good intentions but make things worse. For example, there are people who have not taken any medical training and yet they prescribe medicine. Although their intention is to help, prescribing medicine without having the necessary knowledge to do so is very dangerous. Another example is people who start teaching or preaching without having the knowledge and skills needed for such a job. They might do some good but the harm resulting from their lack of knowledge is at times so great that their action cannot be considered moral no matter how good their intention may be.

There is a famous historical event in which an old man was given a drink and was told to offer it to Mālik al-Ashtar, a great companion of Imam Ali (a). He did not know the person who gave him the drink and yet he gave it to Mālik al-Ashtar. Malik took the drink and drank it because he

thought it was provided by the old man who appeared to be a good person. However, the drink was poisoned and Mālik was martyred. The old man had the intention of helping Mālik but he gave Mālik a drink the contents of which he did not know and also did not tell Mālik that the drink came from someone else. Therefore, the old man's action was not moral and led to the death of a very respectable person.

Thus, we have to make sure that we have both good intentions and good actions, and in the Qur'an there is the concept of al-'amal al-sālih (the righteous deed). It should be noted that a righteous deed is one that is good in itself as an action and is also performed with good intentions by the agent.

### III. Self-Love as a Major Motive

In addition to taking actions, qualities, and intentions into account, another point to be considered is that we human beings certainly have self-love (*hubb al-dhāt*). Self-love exists to such an extent that it has caused some people to believe that human beings have psychological egoism. Human beings are created in such a way that we are naturally concerned with our own interests. Therefore, some people say that there is no point in asking people to behave differently since it is due to our creation that we think about ourselves and do what serves our own interests. They believe that the reason we make efforts throughout our lives and struggle to survive is that we love ourselves and we want to

remain alive and active. As a result, they say that morality cannot ask a person to become something which is contrary to what they are naturally. Those who believe in egoism sometimes use psychological egoism as a back-up or even as an argument for their point of view.

Of course, there are also people who do not accept this. They say that if this is the case then there is no point in having morality. If we are already automatically and naturally only concerned with our own interests, then there would be no need for a morality which tells us to safeguard our own interests because we would already be doing that in the first place. However, the egoist answers this question by saying that what is needed is to educate people so that instead of only being attentive to their short term interests, they also tend towards their long term interests. In addition, they can also learn to accommodate the interests of others without sacrificing their own interests.

### IV. Genuine Desire for the Good of Others

We definitely do possess a desire for serving our own interests. However, at the same time, it would appear that we human beings have a genuine desire to serve the interests of other people as well. Human sympathy is a genuine desire. When we see a person in need, such as a blind person who wishes to cross the road, and we help him, we are not thinking of what we will be able to gain out of that action. When a mother sees that her child is crying, the mother does

not help the child in order to gain anything. Of course, we know that she would gain peace of mind or reward from God when she looks after her child, but in many if not most cases the intention behind her action is not to gain peace of mind or reward; she does it merely because she loves her child.

In my opinion, we human beings have two types of desires: desires which are oriented towards our own self-interest and desires which are oriented towards the interests of others. It is quite possible to do something to benefit others without even implicitly thinking about our own self-interest.

### V. Serving God and Serving Others for the Sake of God

According to the Islamic moral theory, the interests of other people are very important. Even the interests of animals and plants are very important. When we want to serve God we are asked to serve Him through serving His creation. God does not need our service Himself as He is free from any need. We are serving God when we do what serves our own interests or the interests of our family members, friends, colleagues, class mates, or indeed any other human being, or even animals or plants (for example by giving water to a flower), provided that we have good intentions. We must not be serving in order to pretend that we are nice people who are, for example, helping animals. When we do these actions in order to please God, they all become moral actions.

So far we have learnt that from the Islamic point of view, actions, qualities of the soul, intentions, the agent's interests, and everyone else's interests are all important and should all be taken into consideration.

## VI. Islamic Ethics Covers All Aspects of Human Life

Although there are different views amongst Muslim ethicists on how to classify moral virtues and actions and their opposites, they agree that Islamic ethics addresses all voluntary human actions and qualities. In what follows, we will try to elaborate on some of the ways in which different trends in Islamic ethics have classified moral values. It is necessary to be able to classify discussions on ethics because there are very many things which could be said.

### Classification According to the Faculties of the Soul

Certain books that discuss human faculties have a mainly philosophical approach to ethics. For example, somewhat influenced by the Aristotelian approach to ethics, scholars such as Narāqī in his *Mi'rāj al-Sa'ādah*, say that human beings have three faculties: the faculty of reason (*al-quwwah al-nātiqah or al-'aqlīyah*), the faculty of anger (*al-quwwah al-ghaḍabīyah*), and the faculty of appetite (*al-quwwah al-shahawīyah*).

These faculties are the principles which help us to work, function, and react. Each faculty has its own virtues and

vices which if taken to extremes, become vicious, but if balanced, become virtuous.

**Faculty of Reason**

In the balanced position with respect to the faculty of rationality, we find *hikmah* (wisdom). It is not good if one becomes too critical, too analytica, and too rational, but it is also not good if one is not thinking and reasoning sufficiently. It is wrong to go to extremes at either end of the spectrum. We must make sure that we are in the middle position which will result in *hikmah* (wisdom).

**Faculty of Anger**

With respect to anger, it is not good if one has an angry disposition and is usually easily angered. On the other hand, it is also not good if one never gets angry, never reacts, and never shows any dissatisfaction. The balanced position is *shajā'ah*, to be brave, which means taking a stand when necessary because rationally, such a situation is supposed to be handled with power, strength, and resistance.

**Faculty of Appetite**

If the faculty responsible for appetite is functioning well, then we have *'iffah* or modesty. If it is too active, it leads to sinful actions. However, if it is not active at all, then one becomes inactive and passive, and in this state marriage does not take place; no communication occurs within society and

no one works in order to earn money for buying goods, building a house, and so on and so forth. Therefore, we need to have this appetite but in a proportionate and appropriate amount or intensity.

### Classification According to the Social and Personal Aspects of Ethics

In some books, ethics is divided into only two major areas: social ethics and personal ethics (*akhlāq-e-ejtimā'ī* and *akhlāq-e-fardī*). The teachings of the Qur'an on morality are about either what each and every person must achieve and refrain from, or what the society or members of the society must achieve and refrain from.

Therefore, the realm of social ethics concerns everything that we need to do as a member of society; it covers such things as behaviour with respect to neighbours, teachers, students, family members, colleagues, and so on. On the other hand, behaviour related to oneself or one's relationship with God is very personal. Of course, sooner or later it will also affect other people because if someone is a good person then this will also be good for other people. However, in principle these things are primarily personal issues.

**Classification According to Four Groups of Human Relations**

This classification divides ethics into four groups of moral teachings concerning our relationship with God, our relationship with ourselves, our relationships with other people, and our relationship with the rest of the world such as with the environment, animals, plants, water, air, and so on and so forth.

There are other ways of classifying ethics but these are the major ways which are presently available.

In future lessons, we will refer to the four classes of morality mentioned above and study firstly, our relationship with our Lord, secondly, our relationship with ourself, thirdly, our relationships with other people, and fourthly, our relationships with the rest of the world and the environment.

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**Summary**

1. From an Islamic point of view, we should pay attention to both voluntary actions and to qualities which are not fixed.

2. From an Islamic perspective, actions on their own are not valuable and it is only when accompanied by good intentions that they become valuable.

3. In Islam both *husn-e-fi'lī* (goodness of the action) and *husn-e-fa'ilī* (goodness of the agent) are necessary.

4. If the agent is to receive credit for their actions, they must be in a conscious state and have good intentions.

5. A righteous deed is the one which is good in itself as an action and is also performed with a good intention by the agent.

6. Human beings have self-love and a desire for doing what serves their own interests. Although some scholars believe that this is not only the dominant but indeed the sole desire in human beings, it seems much closer to the truth that at the same time we human beings have genuine desire for doing what also serves the interests of other people.

7. When we want to serve God, we are asked to serve Him by serving His creation such as other human beings, animals, plants, and indeed any other creation in this world since God Himself is free from any need.

8. Muslim scholars have used different models to classify their discussions on ethics, some of which were mentioned in the text. One such classification is to divide ethics into four parts: teachings concerning our relationship with God, our relationship with ourselves, our relationships with other people, and our relationship with the rest of the world (i.e. with the environment, animals, plants, water, air, and so on.) It is according to the above classification that we will continue our discussion.

## Lesson Seven:

## Outcomes of Living a Moral Life

### Introduction

In this lesson, we will study some of the beautiful outcomes of living a moral life. We will mention some of the points that can be found in the Qur'an and the hadiths. However, it is certainly most beneficial to experience these things ourselves. We can best understand and feel such things when we achieve them ourselves or when we at least live with someone who has these qualities.

### I. Complete Support by God

God will fully support such people in addition to His general support for all human beings. There is a very famous hadith in which Prophet Muhammad (s) asked God about the status of believers and God's answer included the following:

> None of My servants can seek proximity to Me by that which is dearer to Me than the things I have made obligatory on them. Then with the performance of the *nawāfil*

(recommended acts)[1] they continuously attain proximity to Me so that I love them. When I love them I will be the ear with which they hear, the eyes with which they see, and the hand with which they write. If they call Me, I will answer, and if they make a request, I will grant it.[2]

It is very important to note that God says that He loves such a person as a whole person. God loves everyone, even His enemies in a sense, but in most cases with some reservations. For God to love someone completely is what really counts.

See the beauty of God! When someone like a king really loves someone and wants to praise them, he says that that person is his "right hand" or is his "eye" and they only say this for a very select number of people. However, God does not say that the person becomes His eye or His hand; instead, God says that He becomes that person's ear, eye, and hand. In a sense, this means that God will be at the service of that person and will do for them whatever they want. See how generous God is! See God's loyalty to His

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[1] This hadith is called the hadith of *Qurb al-Nawafil* which means proximity (to God) caused by *nawāfil.*

[2] *Irshād al-Qulūb ila al-Sawāb*, vol. 1, p. 9. The original text is as follows:

لايَزَالُ عَبْدِى يَتَقَرَّبُ إِلَىَّ بِالنَّوَافِلِ مُخْلِصاً لِى حَتَّى أُحِبُّهُ فَإِذَا أَحْبَبْتُهُ كُنْتُ سَمْعَهُ الَّذِى يَسْمَعُ بِهِ وَ بَصَرَهُ الَّذِى يُبْصِرُ بِهِ وَ يَدَهُ الَّتِى يَبْطِشُ بِهَا إِنْ سَأَلَنِى أَعْطَيْتُهُ

beloved ones – those who love Him so much that He then loves them.

## II. Knowledge

This knowledge is not conventional knowledge which is limited, and subject to mistakes and being forgotten. This knowledge is given by God. The Prophet (s) says that regarding such servants, God told him:

> I will love them when they love Me and I will make them loved by My creation. And I will open up their inward eyes to My Glory and Grandeur and I will not hide from them [the knowledge of] the select of My creation. In the darkness of night and the light of day, I will tell them secrets so that their conversations with creatures and with their companions will be cut off. I will make them hear My words and the words of My angels. And I will reveal to them the secret I have hidden from My creation.[3]

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[3] *Irshād al-Qulūb ila al-Sawāb*, vol. 1, p. 204. The original text is as follows:

فَإِذَا أَحْبَبْتُهُ وَ فَتَحْتُ عَيْنَ قَلْبِهِ إِلَى جَلَالِي فَلَاأُخْفِي عَلَيْهِ خَاصَّةَ خَلْقِي فَأُنَاجِيهِ فِي ظُلَمِ اللَّيْلِ وَ نُورِ النَّهَارِ حَتَّى يَنْقَطِعَ حَدِيثُهُ مِنَ الْمَخْلُوقِينَ وَ مُجَالَسَتُهُ مَعَهُمْ وَ أُسْمِعُهُ كَلَامِي وَ كَلَامَ مَلَائِكَتِي وَ أُعَرِّفُهُ السِّرَّ الَّذِي سَتَرْتُهُ عَنْ خَلْقِي

Such a person is inspired by God so much, and receives communications from Him, that they do not need to ask anyone about anything or speak to anyone. Therefore, their conversations with others are kept to a minimum. This means that either they only speak when necessary, or it can mean that even when they are talking and listening to people they are in constant communication with God, listening for God's message to them in the form of words coming from other people. We can receive messages from God through the words of people. For example, sometimes a child may give us a message which is from God even though they themselves do not know this. Sometimes even our enemies may tell us something which is very useful and thus it is a message for us from God coming through that channel. Therefore, it is possible that the hadith means that such people will keep their conversations with people to a minimum or that they would effectively be listening to God all the time, even when engaged in conversation with people. Indeed it can actually mean that both things are true.

### III. Exclusive Devotion to God

Exclusive devotion means to be cut off from anything other than God. In other words, to be free from reliance on anything other than Him and to see everything as a sign and manifestation of His power and grace. True servants of God live within society and do not isolate themselves from other people, but at the same time, they remain totally

mindful of God and remember Him constantly. The Qur'an praises a group of people for whom neither business nor trading distracts them from remembering God, keeping up prayers, and giving alms:

> *...by men whom neither trading nor bargaining distracts from the remembrance of Allah and the maintenance of prayer and the giving of zakat. They are fearful of a day wherein the heart and the sight will be transformed* (24:37)[4]

Imam Ali (a) and other members of the household of the Prophet (s) called upon God saying:

> My God! Make me completely cut off from all else but You, and enlighten the vision of our hearts with the radiance of looking at You, until the vision of our hearts penetrates the veils of light and reaches the source of grandeur. And set our spirit to be suspended at the glory of Your sanctity.[5]

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[4] The Arabic text is as follows:

رِجالٌ لا تُلْهيهِمْ تِجارَةٌ وَ لا بَيْعٌ عَنْ ذِكْرِ اللّهِ وَ إِقامِ الصَّلاةِ وَ إيتاءِ الزَّكاةِ يَخافُونَ يَوْماً تَتَقَلَّبُ فيهِ الْقُلُوبُ وَ الأَبْصار

[5] *Iqbāl al-A'māl,* vol. 2, p. 687. The original text is as follows:

This short paragraph needs at least a complete essay to explain it properly; however, in brief, after experiencing the light of God, the sweetness of talking to God, and the beauty of being close to God, such a servant of God then goes further and further on their journey and becomes detached from everything, dedicating themselves to God alone and striving to go forward and reach the source of grandeur and glory which is God Himself.

### IV. Entrance to the Realm of Light

God says in the Qur'an:

> *God is the guardian of the believers, taking them from darknesses to light.* (2:257)[6]

### V. Immense Love for God

The mystic (*'arif*) is not the one who merely loves God; rather, they are someone who loves God alone because their love or hatred, like and dislike, for anything else is only for the sake of God. Such a person wills and desires only what his Beloved wills and desires and has no will other than that of his Beloved. The mystic's love for God permeates their

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إِلَهِي هَبْ لِي كَمَالَ الانْقِطَاعِ إِلَيْكَ وَ أَنِرْ أَبْصَارَ قُلُوبِنَا بِضِيَاءِ نَظَرِهَا إِلَيْكَ
حَتَّى تَخْرِقَ أَبْصَارُ الْقُلُوبِ حُجُبَ النُّورِ فَتَصِلَ إِلَى مَعْدِنِ الْعَظَمَةِ وَ تَصِيرَ
أَرْوَاحُنَا مُعَلَّقَةً بِعِزِّ قُدْسِك

[6] The Arabic text is as follows:

اللهُ وَلِيُّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا يُخْرِجُهُمْ مِنَ الظُّلُماتِ إِلَى النُّور

love for anything else. Thus, the mystic loves God, and through God they love their family, children, and friends. Indeed, through God they love all of humanity and even the whole of creation, including animals. The only issue here is that all of this love for the different parts of creation are through God and are therefore not independent.

There is a verse in the Qur'an where God recounts the story of Abraham (a) asking God for a pure heart. He (a) asks God not to be abandoned on the Day of Resurrection when neither children nor money can help, and only having a pure heart will be of any use:

> *The day when neither wealth nor children will avail, except him who comes to God with a sound heart* (26:88-89)[7]

So God grants him a pure heart as we know from other verses in the Qur'an where God says:

> *Indeed Abraham was among his followers, when he came to his Lord with a sound heart* (37:83-84)[8]

Commenting on this verse, Imam al-Sadiq (a) said:

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[7] The Arabic text is as follows:

يَوْمَ لاَيَنفَعُ مَالٌ وَ لا بَنُونَ إلا مَنْ أتىَ اللّهَ بِقَلْبٍ سَلِيمٍ

[8] The Arabic text is as follows:

وَ إِنَّ مِن شِيعَتِهِ لَابْرَاهِيمَ إِذْ جَاءَ رَبَّهُ بِقَلْبٍ سَلِيمٍ

> The pure heart is the one that meets its Lord while it is free from anyone else. Any heart in which there is doubt, or there is polytheism, is ill.[9]

Nothing short of reaching God can satisfy a spiritual wayfarer. The Qur'an says:

> *Surely with the remembrance of God do hearts come to rest.* (13:28)[10]

Imam al-Sajjad (a) says:

> Nothing will cool my burning thirst except reaching You, nothing will quench my ardour except meeting You, nothing will dampen my yearning except gazing upon Your face, nothing will settle me in my settling place without closeness to You,[11]

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[9] *al-Kāfī,* vol. 2, p. 16. The original text is as follows:
اَلْقَلْبُ السَّلِيمُ الَّذِي يَلْقَى رَبَّهُ وَ لَيْسَ فِيهِ أَحَدٌ سِوَاهُ قَالَ وَ كُلُّ قَلْبٍ فِيهِ شِرْكٌ أَوْ شَكٌّ فَهُوَ سَاقِطٌ

[10] The Arabic text is as follows:
أَلا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوب

[11] *Zād al-Ma'ād,* p. 414. The original text is as follows:
وَ غُلَّتِي لاَيُبَرِّدُهَا إِلا وَصْلُكَ، وَ لَوْعَتِي لاَيُطْفِيهَا إِلا لِقَاؤُكَ، وَ شَوْقِي إِلَيْكَ لاَيَبُلُّهُ إِلاالنَّظَرُ إِلَى وَجْهِكَ، وَ قَرَارِي لاَيَقِرُّ دُونَ دُنُوِّي مِنْكَ

Thus, he is saying to God that he is like a thirsty person whose thirst can only be quenched by God's love.

## VI. Witnessing God in Everything

The real mystic is the one who witnesses God in everything.

In his Du'a of 'Arafah, Imam Husayn (a) says:

> O my God, through the variety of Your signs in the world of being, and the changes in states and conditions, I realize that the purpose is to make Yourself known to me in everything so that I would not ignore You in anything.[12]

Of course, we are not significant but God is so concerned about us that He makes Himself known to us.

Imam Ali (a) says:

> I saw nothing except that I saw God before it and with it and after it.[13]

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[12] *Iqbāl al-A'māl,* vol. 1, p. 348. The original text is as follows:
إِلَهِي عَلِمْتُ بِاخْتِلَافِ الآثَارِ وَ تَنَقُّلَاتِ الأَطْوَارِ أَنَّ مُرَادَكَ مِنِّي أَنْ تَتَعَرَّفَ إِلَيَّ فِي كُلِّ شَيْءٍ حَتَّى لاأَجْهَلَكَ فِي شَيْءٍ

[13] *Mir'āt al-'Uqūl fī Sharh Akhbār Āl al-Rasoul,* vol. 10, p. 391. The original text is as follows:
ما رأيت شيئا إلا و رأيت الله قبله أو بعده أو معه

Naturally, the vision mentioned here is not a physical vision of God. It is a vision of the heart; a spiritual connection with God.

Therefore, we should be certain that if we lived by moral standards we would have a very pleasant life, even in this world. We would start experiencing the blessings of God given to the people of heaven. The greatest reward would then be given to us in heaven, which is the place where there is no limitation. God cannot demonstrate all His great mercy and blessings to pious people in a complete and perfect way in this world because this world is very limited. However, in heaven there are no restrictions. Heaven is the place where God's mercy becomes manifest in the best possible way. However, even in this limited world we can still experience enough of the blessings of heaven to make us prefer one hour of such a life to living hundreds of years of a materialistic life.

Hopefully, all of us have experienced those beautiful moments in life when we feel connected to God – maybe during prayer, during the month of Ramaḍan, or at Hajj. At these times we feel that we are totally connected to God. We experience how beautiful such a life is, how much we enjoy talking to God, how much we enjoy our heart becoming soft and enlightened, and how we feel that we love everyone. We feel that nothing matters to us apart from God the Almighty and that we have no problems at all. These beautiful

moments are so valuable that we yearn to experience them again and again, even if this would mean that we were to lose everything that we have. If someone were to tell us that we would be able to purchase those beautiful connections to God by giving up everything that we have, even our very life, we would surely do so.

Imam al-Sajjad (a) says:

> O Allah! Who is the one who has tasted the sweetness of Your love and then has looked for a substitute?[14]

Unfortunately, the problem which some of us have is that we have not tasted this closeness to God, and this makes us pleased with other things. If someone has really tasted such an experience, they will not be satisfied with anything else.

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## Summary

1. God will fully support the one who lives a moral life, in addition to His general support for all human beings.

[14] *Zād al-Ma'ād,* p. 412. The original text is as follows:
إِلَهِي مَنْ ذَا الَّذِي ذَاقَ حَلاوَةَ مَحَبَّتِكَ فَرَامَ مِنْكَ بَدَلا

2. They also will be given a special type of knowledge which is not limited, nor is it subject to mistakes and being forgotten.

3. Such people will be cut off from anything other than God, which means to be free from reliance on anything other than God and to see everything as a sign and manifestation of His power and grace.

4. They see God in everything by vision of the heart and spiritual connection with God.

5. The mystic is not the one who merely loves God; rather, they are someone who loves God alone because their love or hatred, like and dislike, for anything else is only for the sake of God.

# Lesson Eight:

# Remembrance of God

## Introduction

In this lesson we will begin to study the values that are encouraged and urged according to the Islamic moral system, following the four-fold classification of moral virtues.

We should also remember that many of the values which we are going to study can be considered as qualities of the soul and as human actions. Therefore, sometimes it is something which has been achieved by a person (in the sense that it is enduring and has become part of their very being as one of their attributes), and sometimes it is an action. Previously there was a discussion about the difference between a quality and an action and we said that although both are important in Islamic ethics, qualities are of course much more important than actions in most cases because they are enduring, have long-term effects, and are an integral part of who we are.

Therefore, firstly we will discuss values related to our relationship with God, starting with remembrance of God.

Remembrance of God is a quality as well as an action. Initially we will refer to some verses of the Qur'an and then we will try to elaborate on this very important concept.

**Remembering God Much and at All Times**

In many verses of the Qur'an God speaks about remembrance of God. Interestingly, this topic is also discussed a great deal in the Bible, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. As far as the Qur'an is concerned, there are many verses about remembrance of God; about those who remember God, those who have forgotten God, and the consequences of each.

One such verse is verse 41 of chapter 3. The verse reads:

وَ اذْكُر رَّبَّکَ كَثِيراً وَ سَبِّحْ بِالْعَشِى وَ الابْكَار

*Remember your Lord much and glorify Him in the evening and the morning.* (3:41)

This tells us that we should remember God as much as possible; *kathīran* literally means "a great deal" or "in abundance" but in reality it means "as much as one can" because there is no limit to the remembrance of God. Indeed there is a hadith from Imam Sadiq (a) which says that everything has a limit except remembrance of God:

ما من شيئ إلا وله حد ينتهى إليه إلا الذكر فليس له حد ينتهى إليه[1]

This includes for example fasting, pilgrimage to Makkah, and even prayer. There are things about which God has mentioned specific timings, numbers, units, and so on and so forth. However, there is no limit when it comes to remembrance of God in general. We should remember Him as much as possible: in the daytime, at night, when working or resting. We should remember God in all circumstances: in times of ease and difficulty, at times when we are healthy or ill, and at times when we are respected by people or abandoned by them. Thus, there is no limit for doing this. In the Qur'an God says:

وَاذْكُرُوا اللهَ كَثِيراً

*Remember Allah much* (8:45)

Therefore, we are advised to remember God very much – as much as we can.

**Glorifying God (*Tasbīh*)**

*Tasbīh* (glorification) is a very important way of remembering God. According to the Qur'an, the concept of *tasbīh*, or glorification of God, is a very far-reaching concept. Everything in this world glorifies God:

[1] *Al-Kafi,* vol. 2, p. 498

يُسَبِّحُ لِلَّهِ مَا فِى السَّمَاوَاتِ وَ مَا فِى الأَرْضِ

*Everything which exists in the heavens and in the earth glorifies God* (62:1)

Even God Himself glorifies Himself. For example, God says:

سُبْحَانَ الَّذِى أَسْرَى بِعَبْدِهِ لَيْلا مِّنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَىَ الْمَسْجِدِ الأَقْصَى

*Glory to (Allah) Who did take His Servant for a Journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque* (17:1)

It is God Who is glorifying Himself in this verse. Elsewhere He says:

سُبْحَانَ اللهِ عَمَّا يَصِفُون

*Glory to (Allah)! He is free (from the things they ascribe) to Him!* (37:159)

Here once again God glorifies Himself. Therefore, this is a very important concept as everything in this world, including God Himself, does *tasbīh* of God.[2]

The angels and the people of heaven also glorify God. For example, when God told the angels that He wanted to

[2] Online lectures on *tasbih* available at: www.al-islam.org/file/reflections-concept-tasbih-glorification-sheikh-dr-shomali-part-1

appoint a caliph, or a vicegerent on the earth, they were surprised. They did not object but simply questioned the need for having a human vicegerent on the earth because, by nature, human beings are subject to committing sins. Human beings will not necessarily commit sin but they do possess such a tendency. So if they are not purified and disciplined, they may do wrong things. Therefore the angels said:

وَ إِذْ قَالَ رَبُّکَ لِلْمَلَائِکَةِ إِنِّی جَاعِلٌ فِی الْأَرْضِ خَلِیفَةً قَالُوا أَتَجْعَلُ فِیهَا مَن یُفْسِدُ فِیهَا وَ یَسْفِکُ الدِّمَاءَ وَ نَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِکَ وَ نُقَدِّسُ لَکَ

*Behold, Your Lord said to the angels: "I will create a vicegerent on earth." They said: "Will You place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood whilst we do celebrate Your praises and glorify Your holy (name)?* (2:30)

They did not mean that Adam (a) himself was going to do such things but they realised that this vicegerency did not only involve Adam (a); since it is an ongoing process, they knew that the progeny of Adam (a) had this potential. This happened in the very first generation of the children of Adam (a) when Cain killed Abel, an act which commenced the problem of shedding blood and making mischief amongst human beings. The angels were therefore right, but what they did not remember or did not know was that there

are both positive and negative things about human beings. They concentrated only on the negative things. So God said:

قَالَ إِنِّی أَعْلَمُ مَا لاتَعْلَمُون

*Indeed I know what you do not know.* (2:30)

Furthermore, later on, when God proved to them that Adam (a) had an immense capacity for knowledge, He told them:

أَلَمْ أَقُل لَّكُمْ إِنِّی أَعْلَمُ غَيْبَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَ الأَرْضِ وَ أَعْلَمُ مَا تُبْدُونَ وَ مَا كُنتُمْ تَكْتُمُون

*Did I not tell you that I indeed know the unseen in the heavens and the earth, and that I know whatever you disclose and whatever you were concealing?* (2:33)

In any case, when the angels wanted to express maximum surprise they said: *"Will You place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood whilst we do celebrate Your praises and glorify Your holy (name)?* (2:30) This is very important because it means that the best thing that they do is *tasbīh* and this *tasbīh* is accompanied with praising God.

### *Tasbīh* Includes Praise of God

According to my understanding *tasbīh* includes praising God. I can bring several proofs from the Qur'an to support this

but here I will mention only one verse.[3] In the chapter entitled *Yūnus*, God says of the people who are in heaven:

دَعْوَاهُمْ فِيهَا سُبْحَانَكَ اللهم

*Their call therein will be, Glory to You, O Allah!* (10:10)

The content of their conversations, their words and their speech, will be "*Glory to You, O Allah!*"

Furthermore, their mode of greeting is described in the following verse:

وَتَحِيَّتُهُمْ فِيهَا سَلَامٌ

*And their greeting therein will be, 'Peace'!* (10:10)

Therefore when they greet one another they will offer peace by saying *salām*. And then they will end their conversation as follows:

وَءَاخِرُ دَعْوَاهُمْ أَنِ الحَمد لله رَبِّ الْعَلَمِين

*And their concluding call, 'All praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of all the worlds.'* (10:10)

Thus the last part of their conversations will be: "*All praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of all the worlds.*" The last part of a conversation is actually part of the whole conversation. If a

[3] Please refer to footnote 1, p. 147.

person speaks for one hour, the last five minutes of their speech is also counted as part of the whole speech. Thus, firstly God says: *"Their call therein will be, Glory to You, O Allah!"* and after this He says that the concluding part of it is: *"All praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of all the worlds."* This means that praising God (*hamd*) is a part of glorification (*tasbīh*). There are many more arguments to support this.

Thus, *tasbīh* is a very profound way of remembering God. As the following verse says, it should be done frequently:

وَ سَبِّحُوهُ بُكْرَةً وَ أَصِيلا

*Glorify your Lord in morning and evenings* (33:42)

When God says "in morning and evenings" this does not mean that *tasbīh* should only be performed in the mornings and the evenings. It means that these particular two times of the day should receive more attention because they are the times when we want to start our activities for the day and when we reach the end of our active day to commence a restful night. The end of the day is a time for reflection and meditation, for reviewing what we have done, for making plans and decisions for our future, for being with our family, and then for being alone with God. Therefore, these are two important parts of the day during which we ought to remember God. We should then demarcate our 24 hours with remembrance of God by connection of these two times through further remembrance of God.

**Exclusive Devotion to God**

In another verse regarding remembering God we read:

وَ اذْكُرِ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ وَ تَبَتَّلْ إِلَيْهِ تَبْتِيلا

*And remember the Name of your Lord and devote yourself to Him with exclusive devotion* (73:8)

One way of remembering God is to remember His names. When we remember His names we remember Him and then we should devote ourselves to Him with exclusive devotion. We ought to try to detach ourselves from anything other than God and then devote ourselves solely to God.

**Outcomes of Remembering God**

There are many verses in the Qur'an about the outcomes of the remembrance of God.

**Tranquillity of the Heart**

In particular, in verse 28 of Chapter *al-Ra'd,* God says:

الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَ تَطْمَئِنّ قُلُوبُهُم بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ

*Those who believe and whose hearts find serenity by the remembrance of God* (13:28)

These verses describe those who first have belief and faith, and then their hearts achieve serenity, tranquillity, peace, and confidence due to their remembrance of God.

Then God mentions this as a general rule which is not exclusive to the people whom He is praising in the first part of the verse:

أَلا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنّ الْقُلُوب

*Be aware that it is by the remembrance of God that hearts come to rest.* (13:28)

Thus it is by the remembrance of God that hearts can find serenity and tranquillity. This is a general rule. It is not only about specific people; every heart can achieve tranquillity and serenity by remembrance of God. The fact that the phrase "*by the remembrance of God*" is mentioned before the verb is perhaps for emphasis but it is more likely to be for exclusiveness which indicates that it is only by the remembrance of God that hearts can come to rest.[4] In some

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[4] In Arabic grammar whenever we bring something earlier which should have come later in a phrase, this is done either for emphasis or to show exclusiveness. They say: (تقديمُ ما حقُّه التأخير يُفيدُ التخصيص). For example, in Arabic the verb comes first and the object and subject come later in a sentence.

In Chapter *al-Fātihah* verse 5 we read:

إِيَّاکَ نَعْبُدُ وَ إِيَّاکَ نَسْتَعِين

*We only worship You and we only ask assistance from You.*

In this verse إِيَّاکَ (You) is the object, so it should have been mentioned after نَعْبُدُ and it was supposed to be نَعْبُدکَ (We worship You). However,

other places in the Qur'an it is actually mentioned that it is impossible to find tranquillity without remembrance of God and thus this exclusivity can also be proved by these other verses.

For example, God says:

وَ مَنْ أَعْرَضَ عَن ذِكْرِى فَإِنَّ لَهُ مَعِيشَةً ضَنكاً

*But whoever disregards My remembrance, his shall be a wretched life.* (20:124)

Such people will not have a life filled with peace and tranquillity and will not enjoy their life. Of course it is possible that they may enjoy life superficially, but deep in their heart they will have great worries and concerns, and they will not find their life meaningful or worth living.

Furthermore God says:

وَ نَحْشُرُهُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ أَعْمَى

---

the object has come earlier to denote exclusiveness, so the meaning has become: *We **only** worship You.*

In verse 28 of Chapter *al-Ra'd,* the natural order would be as follows:

أَلا تَطْمَئِنّ الْقُلُوب بِذِكْرِ الله

However, God said :

أَلا بِذِكْرِ الله تَطْمَئِنّ الْقُلُوب

*....and on the Day of Resurrection We shall raise him blind.* (20:124)

This is a very dire warning which continues with:

قَالَ رَبِّ لِمَ حَشَرْتَنِى أَعْمَى وَ قَدْ كُنتُ بَصِيراً

*He will say, 'My Lord! Why have You raised me blind, though I used to see?'* (20:125)

The answer to this is stated thus:

قَالَ كَذَلِكَ أَتَتْكَ ءَايَاتُنَا فَنَسِيتَها وَكَذَلِكَ الْيَوْمَ تُنسى

*So it is. Our signs came to you, but you forgot them, and thus you will be forgotten today.* (20:126)

What does it mean to be forgotten? Does it mean that God loses track of such a person? Actually, it means that God does not remember them with His special love, care, and mercy. When we say that someone is forgotten it means that they are not receiving special attention; they are forsaken and abandoned.

Therefore, God says that those who have forgotten Him have a miserable life. In contrast, those who remember Him have tranquil hearts; they have confidence, peace, and serenity in their life. There are many, many verses in the Qur'an which could be mentioned regarding this.

Therefore, one important benefit of remembrance of God is to acquire this tranquillity. A person who remembers God is like a container of water connected to an ocean. If we are connected to an ocean, then we would not easily evaporate or be finished. So we are connected to an ocean and this gives us the maximum amount of tranquillity. A *mu'min* (i.e. believer) who is connected to God feels confident and peaceful even if he faces a great many struggles and challenges because he knows that he will always have adequate support and backing from God.

**Illumination of the Heart**

Another benefit of remembrance of God which should be mentioned is that our hearts become illuminated. For example, there is a hadith from Imam Ali (a) in which he says:

> إِنَّ اللهَ سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى جَعَلَ الذِّكْرَ جَلاءً لِلْقُلُوبِ تَسْمَعُ بِهِ بَعْدَ الْوَقْرَةِ وَتُبْصِرُ بِهِ بَعْدَ الْعَشْوَةِ وَتَنْقَادُ بِهِ بَعْدَ الْمُعَانَدَةِ
>
> Certainly God, the Glorified, the Sublime, has made His remembrance a polish and an illumination for the hearts that hear with its help despite deafness, see with its help despite blindness, and become submissive with its help despite unruliness.[5]

[5] *Nahj al-Balāghah (Subhi Sālih),* p. 342, sermon 221

When metals become rusty or eroded, we have to clean and polish them.[6] When they are cleaned, for example by using some kind of chemicals, and then they are polished, they become shiny again. Hearts are like this. Sometimes they can become dusty and maybe even very dirty. They need to be polished and they can be polished by the remembrance of God. Imam Ali (a) says that God has made His remembrance a way to polish our hearts. Thus, after being unable to hear and see as if they are deaf and blind because they cannot understand the truth, hearts then start hearing, seeing. and understanding again because of remembrance. Then he says that hearts which are hostile become soft and obedient with remembrance of God.

These are merely a few of the very many things which can be said about the remembrance of God. God willing, towards the end of this book there will be a chance to discuss this subject in more detail, especially with reference to the beautiful Verse of *Nūr* (light) which is in Chapter *al-Nūr,* and the verse following it which is about people who constantly remember God.

So in this session we have said that one of the most important virtues with respect to our relationship with God is to remember God as much as possible. If we remember

[6] In Arabic this is called jalā' (جلاء).

God properly then everything else can be achieved and will fall into place.

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**Summary**

1. One of the virtues regarding our relationship with God is remembrance of God which is both an important quality and an important action.

2. Many verses of the Qur'an speak about remembrance of God and interestingly, we find that this topic is also discussed a great deal in the Bible, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

3. When it comes to remembrance of God in general there is no limit. We should remember Him as much as possible.

4. *Tasbīh* (glorification of God) is a very important way of remembering God. According to the Qur'an, the concept of *tasbīh* is a very far-reaching concept. Everything in this world glorifies God and even God Himself glorifies Himself.

5. *Tasbīh* is something which is carried out by the people of heaven and by angels and it includes praising God.

6. God says that those who have forgotten Him have a miserable life and will be resurrected blind on the Day of Judgment. However, those who remember Him have

tranquil hearts with confidence, peace, and serenity in their life.

7. Another benefit of the remembrance of God is that our hearts become illuminated.

## Lesson Nine:

## Worshipping God

### Introduction

The second virtue with respect to our relationship with God is to be a worshipper (*'ābid*) of Him. In this lesson we will discuss the virtues of worshipping and serving God, and the difference between them. Then we will explain how servitude is the core of the Islamic moral system.

### Worshipping God is not merely a physical action.

Worshipping God is one of the goals of creation. God says in the Qur'an:

> وَ مَا خَلَقْتُ الجِنّ وَ الانسَ إلا لِيَعْبُدُون مَا أُرِيدُ مِنْهُم مِّن رِّزْقٍ وَ مَا أُرِيدُ أن يُطْعِمُون
>
> *I did not create the jinn and the humans except that they may worship Me. I desire no provision from them, nor do I desire that they should feed Me.* (51:56-57)

God does not need our actions, worship, or donations. Everything that we have comes from Him and He is absolutely free from need. He has created us and He gives us

opportunities to achieve righteousness and perfection. The best way for us to achieve these qualities is to serve God Who is the Most Perfect and Who has no need. He has no reason for creating us and no reason for asking us to do certain things except for our own improvement and wellbeing. Therefore, if we worship God Who is the Most Perfect, it means that we serve perfection, truth, righteousness, and beauty. By doing so, we ourselves also gradually achieve these qualities. We can begin to get closer to God by worshipping Him, following Him, and listening to Him.

However, it is very important that we remember that worshipping God is not merely carried out by physical action. Unfortunately, sometimes we become too ritualistic; we forget the spirit behind the actions because we only concern ourselves with the physical or outward side of them. We need to remember God and one of the best ways of remembering God is to pray:

أَقِمِ الصَّلَوٰةَ لِذِكْرِى

*Maintain the prayer for My remembrance.* (20:14)

However, sometimes we begin to perform prayer whilst we are not remembering God. As a result, our prayer becomes like an action or a routine which we do automatically, like a robot, without having understanding.

Our other acts of worship (*ibādah*), may suffer from the same problem because sometimes we human beings become involved only in physical actions. We go to the masjid or to other places of worship and we automatically start doing things out of habit. Sometimes we spend hours doing things which are supposed to be examples of worshipping God but we do not make any progress nor take any steps towards God because we are only doing certain routine actions devoid of understanding; in this way we are not strengthening our devotion to God.

### Difference Between Worshipping and Serving God

We should distinguish between two things: worshipping God (*'ibādah*) and serving God (*'ubūdīyah*). Being a worshipper may not mean that one is a servant of God. We should want to become a servant (*'abd*), not just a worshipper (*'ābid*), although of course a proper *'ābid* is also a *'abd*. Unfortunately, as there is a problem with people being merely ritualistic, we must make this distinction by explaining that although it is good to worship God, we should not want to become mere worshippers but rather should want to become servants of God.

When we talk about Prophet Muhammad (s) we say:

أَشْهَدُ أَنَّ مُحَمَّدا عَبْدُهُ وَرَسُولُهُ

I bear witness that Muhammad (s) is His servant and messenger.

We do not say "I bear witness that Muhammad (s) is His worshipper." We do not say that he only worshipped God and was *'ābid*. On the contrary, he was a *'abd*, a servant of God.

When we are servants of God it is not only our physical acts of worship that are counted. We are servants of God even when we are eating, drinking, or sleeping because we have dedicated everything that we have to God.

A servant is not rewarded for his actions alone. A servant does not receive payment, wages, or reward from his master only for certain actions. A master feels responsible for the welfare of his servants 24 hours a day.

If, however, a person works for someone for a few hours a day, then during those working hours his employer feels responsible for him. After that, the employee is free to do whatever he wants and is responsible for his own life. The employer will not feel responsible for him and will not be concerned about whether or not he has a place to live, food to eat, family or financial problems, and so on. Such things do not make any difference to the employer because he employed the person for a specific number of hours and so he is only responsible for paying a fair salary for those working hours. Of course, if the employer is a kind and merciful person the situation may be different, but such extra care is not an obligation on them because a person

who is working for an agreed amount of time has no right to ask for support outside of their working hours or for payment for their free time.

However, when a person becomes someone's servant permanently and lives with his employer, he becomes like part of the family and the employer feels responsible for everything related to that person. There is no time limit for this responsibility because the servant is with his employer, available and at his service 24 hours a day, seven days a week. So the employer feels responsible and has to care for his servant all the time.

Accordingly, God even rewards believers for sleeping in the month of Ramaḍan. As Prophet Muhammad (s) said in a sermon delivered in the month of Sha'bān when the month of Ramaḍan was approaching:

أَنْفَاسُكُمْ فِيهِ تَسْبِيحٌ وَ نَوْمُكُمْ فِيهِ عِبَادَةٌ

> Your breathing in this month is considered as *tasbīh* (glorification of God) and your sleep as *'ibadāh*.[1]

This is so because such a person is constantly in the state of *'ibadāh* since they are fasting and listening to God. Therefore, God treats them so generously and kindly that even their sleep is considered *'ibadāh*, whether it is during the day or the

[1] *Amāli (Sadūq)*, p. 93

night. Of course, sleeping during the day when fasting is *'ibadāh* but it is even considered as such at night when one is not fasting because the whole month of Ramaḍan is the feast of God and God treats all believers in this month as His permanent, full-time servants.

However, after the month of Ramaḍan the situation is different. If we have learnt how to maintain this servitude, then we will remain present at the feast of God; God will give us so much that we will be fully satisfied and He will reward us for everything. There is no reason why our sleep should be *'ibadāh* only in the month of Ramḍan. Even after the month of Ramaḍan there are people whose sleeping, walking, talking, eating, and drinking are counted as *'ibadāh* because they have devoted everything they have to God and they are always at His service. God knows that they have certain needs and so He considersmeeting those needs as also part of their servitude.

Therefore, through worshipping God we need to be able to achieve servitude; through *'ibadāh* we have to achieve *'ubūdīyah* rather than only being satisfied with mere physical actions.

### Servitude as the Core of the Islamic Moral System

The following are two verses of the Qur'an about serving God. One is the second verse of chapter 39:

إِنَّا أَنزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ فَاعْبُدِ اللهَ مُخْلِصاً لَّهُ الدِّين

*Surely We have revealed to you the Book with the truth, therefore serve Allah, being sincere to Him in obedience* (39:2)

God has revealed the Qur'an with the truth, and truthfully, to the Prophet (s). What should the Prophet (s) do in response? He has to do many things but to summarise them, God says: *therefore serve Allah, being sincere to Him in obedience* (39:2) If we are sincere and truthfully serving God, then everything else will come with this. The most important thing is to achieve the status of being the servant of God the Almighty.

The second verse is verse 162 of chapter 6:

قُلْ إِنَّ صَلاتِي وَنُسُكِي وَمَحْيَايَ وَمَمَاتِي لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِين

*Say, surely my prayer and my sacrifice and my life and my death, all are for Allah, the Lord of the worlds.* (6:162)

This is said by Prophet Abraham (a) and is a very profound statement. He said that his prayer is for his Lord and not only his prayer but his sacrifice and everything else are also offered by him to God. Moreover, he said that all of his life is for his Lord and indeed even his death is for his Lord.

This means that because one has given one's life to God, then when one dies it is because of Him. This is a very amazing and profound statement. How is it possible to dedicate our death to someone? Death is not something which we bring about voluntarily so how can someone say that they have died for the sake of God? Of course, those who are killed in the way of God can say that they have died for the sake of God. But what about those people who die of natural causes? The answer is that when one dedicates one's life to God, then one's death is automatically also counted as part of that dedication. If our intention is to serve God as long as we are alive, then when we die, our death is also counted as part of that service. It is like a seal which is placed on one's life stating that this person has been at the service of His Lord all the time. Therefore, when one dies in such a state of servitude to God, one will be resurrected as a servant of God. God alone knows how much such people will be given because those believers who are servants of God will be enormously and generously rewarded by God.

By saying *"Surely my prayer and my sacrifice and my life and my death, all are for Allah, the Lord of the worlds"* we are stating that we want to live as long as our Lord so wishes. So if He wants us to be alive, we are satisfied with that and if He wants us to die, we are equally content with that. Regardless of what He wills, we will continue to be at His service.

This shows that in the Islamic moral system we have to be engaged in acts of worship and then aim to achieve the quality of being a servant of God. We should start with *'ibadāh* by becoming a worshipper, but then we should reach the level of *'ubūdīyah*, servitude. We should strive to become a servant rather than merely remaining a worshipper.

This is one of the absolutely essential elements – indeed one could say the core – of the Islamic moral system, because then one will do all good things through this servitude. If someone is a servant of God then they will be good to themselves, to their friends, family members, parents, neighbours, partners, and so on. Such a person will always try to be kind and helpful, and will even support animals and plants because they are a servant of God Who is the Lord of the universe, the One who is the Most Merciful and therefore they too should become merciful. Thus, this servitude is a very essential quality in the Islamic moral system.

Prophet Muhammad (s) was chosen by God as His final messenger because of this quality and so it is not accidental that amongst all the qualities which he possessed, we must repeat in every prayer:

أَشْهَدُ أَنَّ مُحَمَّدا عَبْدُهُ وَرَسُولُهُ

I bear witness that Muhammad was a servant of Allah and a messenger of Allah.

Therefore, being a servant of God was what he achieved, and being a messenger of God was what God gave him. In return for his servitude, God made him His messenger, and because he was the most humble servant of God, God chose him for the highest position. This is because when someone achieves such servitude, God raises and elevates him.

In this regard Imam al-Sādiq (a) is quoted as saying:

> الْعُبُودِيَّةُ جَوْهَرٌ كُنْهُهَا الرُّبُوبِيَّة
>
> Servitude to God is a substance whose essence (core) is lordship.[2]

When we obey and serve God then we become like a lord. We gain nobility, prestige, and lordship. God elevates us so much that we will be given control over many other creatures of God.

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**Summary**

1. Worshipping God is considered as one of the goals of creation. God does not need us to worship Him, so our worship of Him is for our own perfection. The best way to achieve perfection is to serve God Who is the most perfect Being.

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[2] *Misbāh al-Shari'ah*, p. 7

2. We should distinguish between two things: worshipping God (*'ibādah*) and serving God (*'ubūdīyah*).

3. Our physical acts of worship are only counted when we are servants of God. When we dedicate everything we have to God then we are considered to be His servants even when we are, for example, sleeping. Thus, even our sleep becomes an act of worship.

4. In the Islamic moral system we have to be engaged in acts of worship and then aim at achieving servitude which is the quality of being a servant of God.

5. If someone is a servant of God then they will be good to themselves, good to their friends, family members, parents, neighbours, and partners, and they will even support animals and plants because they are a servant of God Who is the Lord of the universe, the One who is the Most Merciful and therefore they too should become merciful. Thus, servitude to God is a very essential quality in the Islamic moral system.

6. Servitude to God is a substance whose essence (core) is lordship.

## Lesson Ten:

## Trusting God

### Introduction

The third quality which we want to discuss in regard to our relationship with God is trusting God (*tawakkul*). In this lesson we will study the concept of trusting God and will examine the reasons why we should trust only in God.

### Trusting God is a Quality of Believers

It is a very important quality to be able to have complete trust in God and this is very much emphasised in the Qur'an. It is considered to be one of the characteristics of believers. There are many verses of the Qur'an which talk about this subject, so we will first look at some of these verses and then we will try to reflect on this concept.

God says that if someone is a *mu'min*, a believer, then they should place their trust in God because believers are those who put their trust in God in each and every situation.

وَعَلَى اللهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ

*....and in Allah should the faithful (ever) put their trust* (3:122)

In verse 23 of chapter 5 God says:

وَ عَلَىَ اللَّهِ فَتَوَكَّلوا إِن كُنتُم مُّؤْمِنِين

*And on Allah should you rely [trust] if you are believers.* (5:23)

Elsewhere when talking about the characteristics of believers, God says:

إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ الَّذِينَ إِذَا ذُكِرَ اللهُ وَجِلَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ وَ إِذَا تُلِيَتْ عَلَيْهِم ءَايَاتُهُ زادَتْهُمْ إِيمَانًا وَ عَلَىَ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلون

*The faithful are only those whose hearts tremble] with awe [when Allah is mentioned, and when His signs are recited to them, they increase their faith, and who put their trust in their Lord* (8:2)

If someone claims to be a believer, they should place their trust in God. A believer should not trust in any other person or thing apart from God because a believer knows that this world belongs to God because it is created and maintained by Him. The only one who has control over this world is God Himself because everyone else is fully dependent on Him.[1]

[1] Of course, this is different from what we mean when we say that we trust people. We trust people in the sense that, for example, we accept what they say because they are trustworthy and we can trust them when they say something. This is a separate issue.

رَبُّ الْمَشْرِقِ وَ الْمَغْرِبِ لاإِلَهَ إِلا هُوَ فَاتَّخِذْهُ وَكِيلا

*Lord of the east and the west, there is no god except Him, so take Him for your trustee* (73:9)

**Reasons for Trusting in God Alone**

**1) God has full power over His affairs.**

Trusting (*tawakkul*), in the sense in which the Qur'an talks about it, means to believe that someone is capable of carrying out whatever they want or whatever they say. God is the only one in the whole world who can do whatever He says that He is going to do it no matter what the circumstances are. In chapter 65 verse 3, God says:

وَ مَن يَتَوَكلَ عَلىَ الله فَهُوَ حَسْبُهُ إِنَّ الله بَالِغُ أَمْرِه

*And whoever puts his trust in Allah, He will suffice him. Indeed Allah carries through His command.* (65:3)

Elsewhere He says:

وَ الله غالِبٌ عَلى أَمْرِه

*And Allah hath full power and control over His affairs* (12:21)

God has all power and all knowledge and there is no one capable of standing in His way to prevent Him from doing anything.

وَ إِن يَمْسَسْكَ اللهُ بِضُرٍّ فَلاَكَاشِفَ لَهُ إِلا هُوَ وَ إِن يَمْسَسْكَ بِخَيْرٍ فَهُوَ عَلَىَ كلُ شىَءٍ قَدِير

*Should Allah visit you with some distress there is no one to remove it except Him; and should He bring you some good, then He has power over all things.* (6:17)

Everything is under His command, subordinate to Him and dependent on Him. Even the most trustworthy people can never say that they will definitely do something for us. They may not have sufficient means available to them, other people may prevent them from doing what they want to do, or they may even die before completing their task. It is only God Who can achieve whatever He wants and is always there.

وَ تَوَكَّلْ عَلىَ الْحَىِّ الَّذِى لاَيَمُوت

*Put your trust in the Living One who does not die* (25:58)

**2) God has knowledge of everything.**

God is all-Knowing; He is aware of all of our needs and He also knows the best way for our needs to be met. He knows about all enemies, all problems, and all solutions. God says in the Qur'an:

وَسِعَ رَبُّنا كُلَّ شَىْءٍ عِلْماً عَلَى اللهِ تَوَكَّلْنا

*Our Lord embraces all things in [His] knowledge. In Allah we have put our trust.* (7:89)

Elsewhere in the Qur'an God says:

وَ تَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيم

*.....and put your trust in Allah. Indeed He is the All-hearing, the All-knowing.* (8:61)

**3) God is all-Merciful.**

God is the One who wants our perfection and our happiness. He does not expect or need anything from us. He is the One who is kind and merciful. He is simply there to give and to support.

وَ تَوَكَّلْ عَلَى الْعَزِيزِ الرَّحِيمِ

*And put your trust in the All-mighty, the All-merciful* (26:217)

Furthermore, He is so very kind that He Himself has offered to be our Master, Helper, and Trustee (i.e. the one who is responsible for looking after our affairs).

In the verses of the Qur'an we read:

وَ إِن تَوَلَّوْاْ فَاعْلَمُواْ أَنَّ اللهَ مَوْلاكُم نِعْمَ الْمَوْلَى وَنِعْمَ النَّصِير

*And if they turn away, then know that Allah is your master: an excellent master and an excellent helper!* (8:40)

He is the only one who does not want us for any selfish reason. Of course, people who are godly and are following the example of God are also kind to us and do not want us

for selfish reasons, but this is because of God. However, anyone disconnected from God usually only wants us for him or herself.

**4) God has been helping and supporting us.**

There is a beautiful verse about the people of Banī Isrā'īl (the children of Israel) who were the progeny of Prophet Jacob (a). They were tried and tested. Some of them successfully passed their tests but some of them failed. In any case, some of the people who were loyal and obedient said:

وَ مَا لَنَا أَلا نَتَوَكَّلَ عَلَىَ اللهِ وَ قَدْ هَدانا سُبُلَنَا

*And why should we not put our trust in Allah, seeing that He has guided us in our ways?* (14:12)

This should be particularly true for us as believers, especially when we remember that in the past, God has guided us, shown us the way, cared for us, and supported us. There is no reason not to trust Him now because God does not change, nor does He lose His power, knowledge, or mercy. If we do not change by becoming a worse kind of person then we do not need to have any worries. God is not going to withdraw His mercy and support from us.

As we read in the Qur'an:

ذَالِکَ بِأَنَّ اللهَ لَمْ یَکُ مُغَیِّراً نِّعْمَةً أَنْعَمَهَا عَلَیٰ قَوْمٍ حَتَیٰ یُغَیِّروا مَا بِأَنفُسِهِمْ

*That is because Allah never changes a blessing that He has bestowed on a people unless they change what is in their own souls.* (8:53)

God will not change our affairs, not for better nor for worse, unless we first change ourselves. God has never been the kind to give us blessing and support, and then change it, unless we ourselves have changed. If we are grateful and thankful, God will leave these blessings with us.

Therefore, those members of Banī Isrā'īl mentioned previously, who were good and true believers, said:

وَ لَنَصْبِرَنَّ عَلیٰ مَا ءَاذَیْتُمُونَا وَ عَلیَ اللهِ فَلْیَتَوَکَّلِ الْمُتَوَکِّلُون

*Surely, we will put up patiently with whatever torment you may inflict upon us. And in Allah let all the trusting put their trust.* (14:12)

They declared that they would remain patient with respect to all the annoying behaviour of the people who had been hurting them and causing difficulties for them. They remained patient because they were connected to God and had confidence that God was supporting them; they knew that he would not abandon them. After this they said that if they want to trust anyone, they should trust God.

Therefore, when we know that a) God is the sole Lord of the universe; He has absolute authority, sovereignty, and control over everything, b) God knows the best way to do things and the easiest solutions to the problems which we must overcome, and c) God is all-Merciful, then we should only trust God.

If we are left alone, counting only on ourselves or counting on our friends or heroes (essentially, masters other than God), then we are nothing and our efforts will come to nothing. We cannot even be sure of achieving the very least of our expectations. If, however, God is on our side, our results can be as we wish, our work can bear fruit, and we can achieve what we want through our efforts.

God says in the Qur'an:

وَ قَالُواْ حَسْبُنَا اللهُ وَ نِعْمَ الْوَكِيل

*And they said, "Allah is sufficient for us and He is an excellent trustee."* (3:173)

Elsewhere He says:

قُلْ حَسْبِيَ اللهُ عَلَيْهِ يَتَوَكَّلُ الْمُتَوَكِّلون

*Say, "Allah is sufficient for me. In Him let all the trusting put their trust."* (39:38)

Addressing the Prophet (s), God says:

فَإِذَا عَزَمْتَ فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَىَ اللهِ إِنَّ اللهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُتَوَكِّلين

*....once you are resolved, put your trust in Allah. Indeed Allah loves those who trust in Him.* (3:159)

Thus, according to the Qur'an, it is a firmly established idea that we should trust God and we cannot trust anyone or anything other than God. With Him, all things are easy. But what does it mean to trust God?

### Islamic Understanding of Trusting God

Unfortunately, there is sometimes a misunderstanding about the concept of trusting God. Some people want to shift all responsibility to God. They want to be lazy, do nothing, and avoid taking any responsibility. They only say that they are doing *tawakkul*, trusting God. They claim that they have entrusted and submitted all of their affairs to God, then they do not do anything themselves. This is not the true meaning of *tawakkul*. This is not the way in which the Prophet (s) trusted God. He did not sit around doing nothing apart from praying, and then claim that he was trusting God. On the contrary, he was a very hard-working person who planned and did his best to implement his plans whilst at the same time trusting God. It has been narrated that once the Prophet (s) saw a group of farmers who were not working but said that they were trusting God. The Prophet (s) told

them that they were not really trusting God; instead, they had become a burden on others.[2]

To trust God means to do our best but also to count only on Him rather than on our own efforts, plans, helpers, friends, or allies. Thus, trusting God does not mean being lazy or just doing things without planning, thinking, consulting, and networking, and without organisational skills. To trust God means to commence everything we do with trusting and relying on Him and then to proceed to do our very best, to do everything that we can, to exhaust all our energies; we say to our Lord that we have honestly done our best and request Him to kindly take over and take care of what remains to be done. This in itself is a very spiritual exercise because we can only trust God in this way when we are doing good things.

We should not make mischief, do wrong things, and harm people, and then tell God that we are trusting Him. We must first choose sacred goals then entrust our affairs to God. We do our very best and after this we leave the results in the God's hands.

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[2] *Mustadrak al-Wasā'il wa Mustanbat al-Masā'il,* vol. 11, p. 217. The original text is as follows:

رَأَى رَسُولُ اللهِ (ص) قَوْماً لايَزْرَعُونَ. قَالَ: مَا أَنْتُم؟ قَالُوا: نَحْنُ الْمُتَوَكِّلُونَ.
قَالَ: لا بَلْ أَنْتُمُ الْمُتَّكِلُونَ.

When we look at Prophet Muhammad (s), the great companions of the Prophet (s), the household of the Prophet (s), Abraham (a), Moses (a), Jesus (a), Noah (a), and all of the great leaders of humanity, we see that they were hard-working, dedicated people. They used to think, plan, and use all available techniques and legitimate means to fulfill their goals, but at the same time, they knew that any success or progress came from God.

May God include us amongst those who trust Him all the time, devote themselves sincerely to Him, remain at His service, and continuously expect His support. When His support is there, it is possible to do things that no one could imagine; God will make us into a channel and through us God will send His mercy to others.

We can become a scholar, a leader, a parent, a social activist, a teacher, or a doctor and in this way countless people can benefit from us. When people look at such a person's life, they are amazed by how much they have done and achieved. They wonder how a person who has lived such a short life can do so many things. The key is that it is not due to this person themselves but due to God who has found them to be a good channel for sending His mercy to other people. This person was not selfish but instead was selfless, and as a result, God chose them to be His agent and used them to bless His people.

May God include us amongst those people who achieve this quality of being selfless so that God chooses us and not only blesses us but, through us, blesses countless people and even humanity as a whole.

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Summary

1. Trusting God is a very important quality and is very much emphasised in the Qur'an. Indeed, it is one of the characteristics of the believers.

2. We should only trust in God who is the sole Lord of the universe. He has absolute authority, sovereignty, and control over everything. He has knowledge of all our needs and He is Merciful and kind to us.

3. To trust God means that once we have decided to do something, we should commence our efforts by making our intention trusting in Him and then do everything we can to achieve our goal. It is only then that we say to our Lord: "*We have honestly done our best. We ask that You kindly take over and take care of what remains to be done.*"

## Lesson Eleven:

## Repentance

### Introduction

We have been studying the virtues related to our relationship with God and we have talked about remembering Him, worshipping Him, and serving Him. We then discussed the need to put our trust in God. In this lesson we want to refer to another important quality which once again can be considered both as an action and also as a state, condition, or quality. This is repentance. We will first explain the meaning of repentance and then we will study different aspects of it.

### Meaning of Repentance

In Arabic, the term which is used for repentance is *tawbah*. It comes from the root *ta-wa-ba* and has derivatives, such as *tawbah*, *tāba*, *yatūbu*, *tā'ib,* and *tawwāb*. They all share the root meaning, with additional individual meanings according to the particular structure of each word.

**Regret and Return**

*Tawbah* means to return. A person who commits a wrongdoing has somehow damaged their relationship with God. They have in some way separated themselves from God. Of course, it is impossible to be absolutely and completely separated from God because we are all creatures of God, which means we are always connected to Him. Here we are talking about a spiritual connection with God or a close relationship with Him which can be ruined.

Therefore, a person who commits a sin has damaged their relationship with God. It is called *tawbah* (to return) when they sincerely regret what they did and they want to return to their original condition before having committed the sin; they want to reverse the damage caused by committing the sin.

For example, sometimes a child may misbehave and this makes his parents unhappy. He may even run away from home because he feels that his parents are angry with him or maybe he thinks that by, for example, visiting strangers and spending time with them outside the family environment, he would have more fun. So the child leaves his parents and runs away from home. But after a while, he starts to feel regretful; he thinks about why he annoyed and disobeyed his parents. After a while, he decides to go back to his parents.

The idea of going back to one's parents is like the return or *tawbah* of a servant who has committed sins and now wants to go back to God by asking for forgiveness. Indeed, the core of *tawbah* is that very remorse and regret which comes from the understanding that one has done something wrong.

Imam al-Bāqīr (a) is quoted as saying:

كَفَى بِالنَّدَمِ تَوْبَةً

Regret is sufficient as *tawbah*.[1]

Of course, this must be automatically accompanied by a decision not to repeat the wrongdoing. Sincere regret for doing something wrong must necessarily include a decision not to do it again. The intention at the time of repentance is that one definitely does not want to commit the wrongdoing again. If a person does happen to commit the same sin again in the future, this would not be intentional.

### Different Aspects of Repentance

Repentance is a very important concept in the Qur'an. As far as the Qur'an is concerned, there is no limit for repentance. In order to further clarify this we will study some verses of the Qur'an regarding various aspects of repentance.

[1] *al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, p. 426

**Sincere, True Repentance**

Unfortunately, sometimes we only verbally declare that we are sorry; we merely recite *istighfār* (to ask for forgiveness) but in our heart there is no effect, no remorse, and no change. This is not sincere repentance because we keep on saying *astaghfir Allah-a Rabbī wa atūbu ilayh* (I ask God, my Lord, to forgive me, and I return to Him) but then continue to commit the same kind of wrongdoing.

In this regard, the Qur'an says:

يا أيُّها الَّذِينَ ءامَنُوا تُوبُوا إِلىَ اللهِ تَوبَةً نَّصُوحًا

*O you who have faith! Repent to God with sincere repentance!* (66:8)

Sincere repentance is that which occurs when a person is genuinely sorry for what they have done. They feel terrible and may even cry over their crimes. They beg God to kindly forgive their sins and they promise to do their very best not to repeat them. They also resolve to remedy all the damage which has been caused.

Once, a person was repeatedly saying *astaghfir Allah* and Imam Ali (a) told him: *istighfār* (to ask for forgiveness) is not as easy as you imagine. *Istighfār* is a very important position. This position is for the good servants of God; it is for

righteous people. If you want to do proper *istighfār*, you should fulfill several requirements.[2]

Of course, some of the things Imam Ali (a) mentioned in that hadith are necessary for achieving perfection in one's repentance and *istighfār*, but some of them are very basic essentials.

Therefore, we should not merely ask God to forgive us verbally, but we should also be genuinely remorseful in our heart. Furthermore, we should try not to repeat the wrongdoing. As Imam Ali (a) says, we should let our soul suffer the pain of doing righteous actions after our soul has sinfully enjoyed the pleasure of doing prohibited actions. Those who enjoyed themselves by committing sinful actions should put pressure on themselves by doing good actions.

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[2] *Nahj al-Balāghah (Subhi Salih)*, p. 549, wise saying no. 417. The original text is as follows :

وَ قَالَ (ع) لِقَائِلٍ قَالَ بِحَضْرَتِهِ أَسْتَغْفِرُ اللَّهَ: ثَكِلَتْكَ أُمُّكَ أَتَدْرِي مَا الِاسْتِغْفَارُ- الاسْتِغْفَارُ دَرَجَةُ الْعِلِّيِّينَ وَ هُوَ اسْمٌ وَاقِعٌ عَلَى سِتَّةِ مَعَانٍ أَوَّلُهَا النَّدَمُ عَلَى مَا مَضَى وَ الثَّانِي الْعَزْمُ عَلَى تَرْكِ الْعَوْدِ إِلَيْهِ أَبَداً وَ الثَّالِثُ أَنْ تُؤَدِّيَ إِلَى الْمَخْلُوقِينَ حُقُوقَهُمْ حَتَّى تَلْقَى اللَّهَ [عَزَّ وَ جَلَّ] أَمْلَسَ لَيْسَ عَلَيْكَ تَبِعَةٌ وَ الرَّابِعُ أَنْ تَعْمِدَ إِلَى كُلِّ فَرِيضَةٍ عَلَيْكَ ضَيَّعْتَهَا فَتُؤَدِّيَ حَقَّهَا وَ الْخَامِسُ أَنْ تَعْمِدَ إِلَى اللَّحْمِ الَّذِي نَبَتَ عَلَى السُّحْتِ فَتُذِيبَهُ بِالأَحْزَانِ حَتَّى تُلْصِقَ الْجِلْدَ بِالْعَظْمِ وَ يَنْشَأَ بَيْنَهُمَا لَحْمٌ جَدِيدٌ وَ السَّادِسُ أَنْ تُذِيقَ الْجِسْمَ أَلَمَ الطَّاعَةِ كَمَا أَذَقْتَهُ حَلاوَةَ الْمَعْصِيَةِ فَعِنْدَ ذَلِكَ تَقُولُ أَسْتَغْفِرُ اللَّهَ

In order to perfect our *tawbah,* Imam Ali (a) has even said that the flesh which has grown on our bones due to harām – for example, from eating harām food – should be made to disappear. We must put so much pressure on ourselves by reducing how much we eat, sleep, and so on, that our flesh melts away and we become a new person. Therefore, we need absolute sincerity in our return to God.

**Compensation**

Compensation must also be made for the wrong that has been done. For example, if a person has not said their prayers or they have not fasted, they should compensate for this by performing their *qaḍa* as explained in Islamic jurisprudence. Therefore, if the time to perform an obligation has passed but there is still time to compensate, it should be carried out. If a person owes someone some money, they must pay it back. If someone has violated the rights of another person, they should try to please them and restore their rights to them.

These issues are studied in a very detailed way in Islamic jurisprudence, but basically the idea is that because one wants to return to the condition in which one was before committing a sin, then one must try to repair every last bit of damage inflicted on oneself and on others. God is never harmed by our misbehaviour, but our relationship with God is harmed, we ourselves are harmed, and in addition to this other people may also be harmed.

**God Forgives All Sins**

Another aspect of repentance is explained by a very beautiful verse in chapter 39. In this verse we read:

> قُلْ يَاعِبَادِيَ الَّذِينَ أَسْرَفُواْ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ لاتَقْنَطُواْ مِن رَّحْمَةِ اللهِ
> إِنَّ اللهَ يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ جَمِيعًا إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمِ
>
> *Say [that God declares,] 'O My servants who have committed excesses against their own souls, do not despair of the mercy of God. Indeed God will forgive all sins. Indeed He is the All- Forgiving, the All-Merciful.* (39:53)

There are many beautiful points in this verse, some of which we will mention here.

First of all, in addressing sinful people God says, "*O My servants.*" This is much more intimate than saying, "Oh those who have done wrong." God wants sinful people to feel close to Him.

Moreover, God says, "*Do not despair of the mercy of God.*" God is telling us not to despair of His mercy. We must not think or say that God will never forgive us because we have done so many bad things. Even if someone has been doing wrong actions all throughout his life, he should still not despair of God's forgiveness.

Another point is that when someone sincerely repents, God does not ask them how many sins they have committed in the sense that He only wants to forgive a few of them. On the contrary, if our repentance is sincere and we are really sorry for all of our wrongdoings, then all of our sins can be forgiven.

In this verse, *inna* (indeed) is used, followed by the word *dhunūb* (sins). The word *dhunūb* is accompanied by *alif* and *lām,* which implies generality.[3] However, in addition to this God also says *jamī'an* (*all)* for maximum emphasis.

Furthermore, God says, "Indeed He is the All-Forgiving, the All-Merciful." This again means that all sins are forgiven by God because He is the *All-Forgiving,* the *All-Merciful.*

The only condition for this is that we should sincerely repent before we actually experience death arriving. When someone is dying and sees death approaching, it is too late. However, God forgives us as long as there is still an opportunity to change our way of life and we sincerely want to change. He places no restrictions on this. He does not start investigating the details of what we have done by, for example, asking

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[3] In Arabic, the plural form of a word, when the structure of its singular form is not preserved (*jam' mukassar*) and it is accompanied by *alif* and *lām,* indicates generality.

why and where we did something or how many wrong things we have done.

What is important for God is that we have now decided to become a new person. We now decided to change from disobedience to obedience, from impurity to purity, and we are ready to compensate for all of the damage that we have caused.

**Transformation of Bad Deeds into Good Deeds**

There are different levels of forgiveness. Sometimes there is simple forgiveness and sometimes our sins are wiped away from our record of deeds. Sometimes God even transforms our bad actions into good actions:

فَأُولَٰئِكَ يُبَدِّلُ اللَّهُ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ حَسَنَاتٍ

*For such, God will replace their misdeeds with good deeds.* (25:70)

This is truly amazing. After their sincere repentance, God may not only forgive the sins of a person who has committed them but in addition, He may transform those sins into good actions; in that person's record of deeds, God replaces their sins with good actions.

For example, a person may have spent £100 on gambling but later on he feels very regretful. He regrets his loss of time, money, and energy, and he feels remorse over what he

has lost from being far from God. He realises how much he could have achieved if instead he had spent that time, money, and energy on serving God. As a consequence, God may change his record so that instead of showing that he spent £100 on gambling, it is now written that he spent £100 on charity work.

Therefore, not only is God not going to use our sins against us and continuously remind us that we have committed such-and-such sins, He may actually transform them into good actions.

Furthermore, with regards to a person who has committed a sin and is then sincerely repentant and wants to change, God not only transforms their bad action into a good action on a one-for-one basis, but there is also a possibility that He may transform the bad action into *multiple* good actions.

In his *Sahifah al-Sajjādyyah*, Imam Zayn al-'Ābidīn (a) addresses God saying:

يَا مُبَدِّلَ السَّيِّئَاتِ بِأَضْعَافِهَا مِنَ الْحَسَنَات

O the One who transforms bad actions into multiple good actions.[4]

This means that God may even register several good actions in place of the single bad action that was committed. This is

[4] *Sahifah al-Sajjādyyah*, p. 36

the extraordinary amount of mercy available to us through God.

**Every Return of a Human Being is Accompanied by Two Returns from God**

There is a beautiful point in the Qur'an, mentioned by the great Allamah Tabātabā'ī in his *al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'an* and also by several other scholars, which is that every *tawbah*, every return, by a human being, is accompanied by two returns by God. [5]

The Qur'an says:

تَابَ عَلَيْهِمْ لِيَتُوبُوا

*He turned to them (mercifully) that they might turn (to Him)* (9:118)

Every case of repentance is preceded by God returning to us. Then, after we return to Him, He comes back to us again. It means that when we damage our relationship with God it is actually God Who initially invites us to go back to Him and prepares us for this return. Thus, the initiative starts with Him. He asks us to come to Him because He wants to forgive us. He makes our heart soft so that we go back to Him. Then when we go back to Him, He embraces us with His mercy and forgives us. The return of God to us

[5] *al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'an,* vol. 4, p. 376 & vol. 9, p. 401

before we repent and the return of God to us after we repent are both mentioned in the Qur'an.

It is the same with parents who want their runaway child to come back home. They themselves send messages to their child or they send friends or relatives to speak to their child in order to encourage and persuade him to come back home. When the child returns, his parents hug and kiss him, and try to make him feel comfortable. The parents may not even remind their child of his bad behaviour because they know that the child himself has realised that what he did was wrong. The child then cries and apologises, and wants to do everything he can to please his parents.

Thus, the parents are happy again and they do not want their child to suffer nor to be constantly reminded of those bad events. Of course, the child himself should feel responsible to make sure that he remembers his mistakes so that he does not repeat them. The parents do not have to keep reminding him because the child has reached a level of understanding which results in automatically doing this himself; showing regret by crying and wanting to do additional good actions. In a similar way, God invites us to return to Him and when we return to Him, He embraces us with His mercy.

**God's Acceptance of Sincere Repentance is Compulsory**

It is impossible to be rejected when we sincerely go to God. In the Qur'an God says:

إِنَّمَا التَّوبَةُ عَلَى اللَّهِ لِلَّذِينَ يَعمَلُونَ السُّوءَ بِجَهَالَةٍ ثُمَّ يَتُوبُونَ مِن قَرِيبٍ

*[Acceptance of] repentance by God is only for those who commit evil out of ignorance, then repent promptly.* (4:17)

*Tawbah*, which in this case means the second return of God which is the acceptance of our return, is compulsory. God has made it obligatory on Himself to accept our repentance.

He says that it is compulsory on Himself to forgive those who do wrong things out of ignorance and then return to Him before it is too late. No one can make anything obligatory on God. This compulsory acceptance of our repentance is a result of the essential nature of God. It is made obligatory by a quality of God not by an outside force.[6] It is impossible for such a merciful Lord not to accept the sincere repentance of His servants.

In another place in the Qur'an, God says:

وَ إِذا جاءَکَ الَّذینَ یُؤْمِنُونَ بِآیاتِنا فَقُلْ سَلامٌ عَلَیْکُمْ کَتَبَ رَبُّکُمْ عَلی نَفْسِهِ الرَّحْمَةَ أَنَّهُ مَنْ عَمِلَ مِنْکُمْ سُوءاً بِجَهالَةٍ ثُمَّ تابَ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ وَ أَصْلَحَ فَأَنَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحیمٌ

*When those who have faith in Our signs come to you, say, Peace to you! Your Lord has made mercy*

[6] *al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'an*, vol. 4, p. 238

> *incumbent upon Himself: whoever of you commits an evil [deed] out of ignorance and then repents after that and reforms, then He is indeed All- Forgiving, All-Merciful.* (6:54)

This clearly indicates that He has made it obligatory upon Himself to be merciful. Therefore, there is no limit to God's mercy and if we sincerely return to Him, He will certainly accept our repentance, God-willing.

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**Summary**

1. Repentance is another important quality which can be considered an action as well as a state, condition, or quality.

2. A person who has committed a sin has damaged their relationship with God. It is called *tawbah*, to return, when they regret this and want to return to their original condition – before having committed the sin – and they want to repair the damage caused by committing it.

3. The core of *tawbah* is that very remorse and regret which comes from understanding that one has done something wrong and must not do it again.

4. A sincere repentance is one which occurs when a person is genuinely sorry for what they have done. Such a person will feel terrible, will ask God to forgive their sins, will

decide not to do the same things again, and will do their best to remedy all damage caused by their wrong actions.

5. Compensation must also be made for what has been done.

6. As far as God's mercy is concerned, He can forgive all of our sins.

7. There are different levels of forgiveness. Sometimes there is simple forgiveness and other times there is a wiping out of our sins from our record of deeds. Sometimes God even transforms our bad actions into good actions.

8. Every return by a human being is accompanied by two returns by God. This means that when we damage our relationship with God, it is God Who initially invites us to go back to Him and prepares us for this return. Then when we go back to Him, He embraces us with His mercy and forgives us.

9. God says that it is compulsory on Himself to forgive those who do wrong things out of ignorance and then return to Him in repentance before it is too late.

## Lesson Twelve:

## Purification of the Soul

### Introduction

Thanks to God, we have discussed several examples of the major virtues and actions related to our relationship with God. Now we will move on to the second group of virtues which concern our relationship with ourselves and what we need to do with respect to ourselves.

The first thing to be mentioned is purification of the soul. In this lesson we will explain this concept and its importance according to verses of the Qur'an, and we will also talk about different levels of the soul. Furthermore, there will be a discussion about purification of the soul as an aim in Islamic spirituality in contrast to those forms of spirituality which aim at strengthening the soul.

### Purification of the Soul Brings Happiness

Purification of the soul, *tazkīyah al-nafs,* is an expression taken from the Qur'an itself. The concept of purification of the soul is mentioned in several places in the Qur'an. For example, God begins Chapter *Al-Shams* with a series of oaths:

وَ الشَّمْسِ وضُحاها وَ الْقَمَرِ إِذَا تَلاها وَ النَّهارِ إِذَا جَلّاها وَ اللَّيْلِ إِذَا يَغْشاها وَ السَّمَاءِ وَ مَا بَناها وَ الأَرْضِ وَ مَا طَحاها وَ نَفْسٍ وَ مَا سَوّاها فَأَلْهَمَها فُجورَها وَتَقْواها

*By the sun and her forenoon splendour, by the moon when he follows her, by the day when it reveals her, by the night when it covers her, by the sky and Him who built it, by the earth and Him who spread it, by the soul and Him who fashioned it, and inspired it with [discernment between] its virtues and vices.* (91: 1-8)

After God swears by these various things, eleven in total, He says:

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَن زَكّاها وَ قَدْ خَابَ مَن دَسّاها

*One who purifies it is certainly felicitous and one who betrays it certainly fails.* (91:9-10)

The person who purifies their soul becomes happy and prosperous whilst, on the other hand, the one who fails to purify their soul and does not do anything to look after it will lose everything. Indeed, the one who purifies their soul will be successful and the one who pollutes and corrupts it will fail. Therefore, what we have to do with respect to our soul is to look after it. We should not simply be indifferent and ignore our soul, telling ourselves that we can do whatever we like. We should not neglect our piety and purity, and allow our soul to associate with whatever it

wishes and do whatever it likes. On the contrary, we have to bring our soul under control. We have to educate, tame, and purify it. When our soul is purified, then it only wants and desires good things.

## Different Levels of the Soul

### The Commanding Soul

Prior to purification, our soul may prompt us to do wrong things. There are different levels of the soul. At the first and lowest level, the soul (*nafs*) commands us to do bad things. At this level, the soul (*nafs*), is called *al-nafs al-ammārah* (the commanding soul).

In the Qur'an, in the story of Prophet Joseph (a), we find this important sentence:

> وَ مَا أُبَرِّئُ نَفْسِی إِنَّ النَّفْسَ لَأَمَّارَةٌ بِالسُّوءِ إِلا مَا رَحِمَ رَبِّیَ إِنَّ رَبِّی غَفُورٌ رَّحِیم
>
> *Yet I do not absolve my [own carnal] soul, for the [carnal] soul indeed prompts [men] to evil, except inasmuch as my Lord has mercy. Indeed my Lord is All-Forgiving, All- Merciful.* (12:53)

There are different views about this verse amongst Qur'anic commentators. Some say it was said by Joseph (a) and others say it was said by Zulaykhā, the wife of the chief minister of Egypt. In either case, it means that no one should

automatically assume that they are a pious and pure person who will never desire or do anything wrong, because at its lowest level, our soul tends to command us to do bad things – that is, unless the mercy of God embraces us.

One of the things God's mercy does is to protect us and help us resist temptations. When surrounded by the mercy of God, we can keep ourselves far away from sinning. Indeed, due to His mercy some people even become infallible. However, if we are left to our own devices and the whims of our souls, we cannot guarantee or be 100% sure that we are not going to do anything wrong. The only thing which we can be 100% sure of are God's mercy, power, knowledge, kindness, and so on.

Of course, this does not mean that everyone is destined to do bad things. There are people who have received this mercy from God and so they are protected. It means that it is God who is needed to help and protect us. Therefore, we should ask Him to do so by inviting Him into our life and letting Him take charge of our affairs.

As we read in the Qur'an:

أُفَوِّضُ أَمْرِي إِلَى اللهِ إِنَّ اللهَ بَصِيرٌ بِالْعِبَادِ

*I entrust my affair to God. Indeed God sees best the servants.* (40:44)

We should implore God to kindly take control of our life so that it is driven and guided by Him. This is what God does for believers:

اللهُ وَلِيُّ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ يُخْرِجُهُم مِّنَ الظُّلُمَٰتِ إِلَى النُّورِ

*God is the Master of the faithful: He brings them out of darkness into light.* (2:257)

God is the Guardian of believers; He is the One who helps them and takes them from darkness into light.

**The Blaming Soul**

Therefore, at its first and lowest level, the *nafs* commands us to do bad things. Then, after resisting the temptations of our soul, we reach a level where our soul becomes *al-nafs al-lawwāmah*, the blaming soul, which is mentioned in the Qur'an:

وَلَآ أُقْسِمُ بِٱلنَّفْسِ ٱللَّوَّامَةِ

*And I swear by the self-blaming soul!* (75:2)

This means that when we do something wrong or fail to do something right, our soul starts blaming us. This shows that progress has been made because the same soul which was previously commanding us to do bad things is now blaming us if we do such things.

### The Tranquil Soul

Having been purified, our soul then reaches the next level and becomes *al-nafs al-mutma'innah*, the tranquil soul, which is also mentioned in the Qur'an:

> يا أَيَّتُها النَّفْسُ الْمُطْمَئِنَّة ارْجِعِى إِلىَ رَبِّكِ رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَّةً
> فَادْخُلى فى عِبَادِى وَادْخُلى جَنَّتى
>
> *O soul at peace! Return to your Lord, pleased, pleasing! Then enter among My servants! And enter My paradise!* (89:27-30)

This soul is connected and confident. It is a soul which remembers God all the time and has become pure.

## Importance and Necessity of Controlling and Purifying the Soul

To reiterate, we must first control our soul and then purify it. Controlling our soul is mentioned in the Qur'an as follows:

> وَ أَمَّا مَنْ خَافَ مَقَامَ رَبِّهِ وَ نَهَى النَّفْسَ عَنِ الهَوى فَإِنَّ الجَنَّةَ هِيَ
> الْمَأْوَى
>
> *But as for him who is awed to stand before his Lord and forbids the soul from [following] desire, his refuge will indeed be paradise.* (79:40-41)

Heaven is the place of residence for the person who feels awe at the position of the Lord and prohibits their soul from pursuing its desires and lusts. Such people will be able to settle in heaven permanently.

Purification of the soul is also mentioned in several verses of the Qur'an, including the verses of Chapter *Al-Shams* mentioned previously and some verses concerning the task of Prophet Muhammad (s). The Prophet (s) had many tasks, but one of his major tasks was to purify believers.

For example, in Chapter *Al-Baqarah,* verse 151, God says:

كَما أَرْسَلْنا فيكُمْ رَسُولاً مِنْكُمْ يَتْلُوا عَلَيْكُمْ آياتِنا وَ يُزَكِّيكُمْ وَ يُعَلِّمُكُمُ الْكِتابَ وَ الْحِكْمَةَ وَ يُعَلِّمُكُمْ ما لَمْ تَكُونُوا تَعْلَمُونَ

*As We sent to you an Apostle from amongst yourselves, who recites to you Our signs and purifies you and teaches you the Book and wisdom and teaches you what you did not know.* (2:151)

We find a similar point being made in verse 164 of Chapter *Āl Ɪmrān* and the second verse of *Chapter Al-Jumu'ah.* Thus, one of the central tasks of the Prophet (s) was *tazkīyah*, to purify.[1]

[1] The Arabic text is as follows:

Interestingly, we find that this was the prayer of Abraham (a) and Ishmael (a). They asked God to raise a messenger amongst the people of Makkah who would recite divine verses to them, teach them the Book and wisdom, and purify them. This prayer is to be found in verses 127 to 129 of Chapter *Al-Baqarah*. They recited it whilst they were restoring the foundations of the Ka'ba[2]; at that sacred moment in time, they prayed to God saying:

وَ إِذْ يَرْفَعُ إِبْرَاهِيمُ الْقَوَاعِدَ مِنَ الْبَيْتِ وَ إِسْمَاعِيلُ رَبَّنَا تَقَبَّلْ مِنَّا إِنَّكَ أَنتَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيم

*As Abraham raised the foundations of the House with Ishmael, [they prayed]: 'Our Lord, accept it from*

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لَقَدْ مَنَّ اللهُ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ إِذْ بَعَثَ فِيهِمْ رَسُولا مِّنْ أَنفُسِهِمْ يَتْلُواْ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَاتِهِ وَ يُزَكِّيهِمْ وَ يُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَ الْحِكْمَةَ وَ إِن كَانُواْ مِن قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِين

*God certainly favoured the faithful when He raised up among them an apostle from among themselves to recite to them His signs and to purify them, and to teach them the Book and wisdom, and earlier they had indeed been in manifest error.* (3:164)

هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الأُمِّيِّنَ رَسُولا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُواْ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَاتِهِ وَ يُزَكِّيهِمْ وَ يُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَ إِن كَانُواْ مِن قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِين

*It is He who sent to the unlettered [people] an apostle from among themselves, to recite to them His signs, to purify them, and to teach them the Book and wisdom, and earlier they had indeed been in manifest error.* (62:2)

[2] The Ka'ba existed before the time of Prophet Abraham (a) but had been damaged and ruined by the flood at the time of Prophet Noah (a). So God had asked them to repair and restore it.

*us! Indeed You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.'* (2:127)

It is very interesting to see how humble they were. Abraham (a) was a prophet and was raising the walls of the Ka'ba, but even so, he was not sure whether his action was accepted or not. So he asked God to kindly accept their deed. Sometimes we do very minor good things and we become proud of ourselves, thinking that they must certainly be accepted. However, Abraham (a) was not sure about his action being worthy and acceptable even though he was rebuilding the House of God.

They then asked God for other things, such as showing them their rituals, and after this they reached the point at which they asked Him for a messenger to be raised from their descendants, as explained in the following verses of Qur'an:

رَبَّنَا وَ ابْعَثْ فِيهِمْ رَسُولا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُواْ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَاتِكَ وَ يُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالحِكْمَةَ وَ يُزَكِّيهِمْ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ الْعَزِيزُ الحَكِيم

*'Our Lord, raise amongst them an apostle from among them, who should recite to them Your signs, and teach them the Book and wisdom, and purify them. Indeed You are the All-Mighty, the All-Wise.'* (2:129)

God answered Abraham (a) and Ishmael's (a) prayer and actually raised such a prophet and messenger from that nation. However, there is a change in the order of the three tasks approved by God. In the prayer of Abraham (a) and Ishmael (a), recitation comes first, teaching the Book and wisdom come second, and purification comes third. On the other hand, in all three places where God refers to the tasks of Prophet Muhammad (s), He mentions recitation first, purification second, and teaching the Book and wisdom third. This means that purification precedes teaching the Book and wisdom.

Thus, the process starts with introducing Qur'anic verses and then continues with following the instructions of the Qur'an and listening to the Prophet (s) as a teacher and role model. Through this process, we are able to purify ourselves and after this we will be able to be taught the Book, which is a pure, sacred, hidden book about which the Qur'an says:

إِنَّهُ لَقُرْءَانٌ كَرِيمٌ فِي كِتَابٍ مَّكْنُونٍ لَايَمَسُّهُ إِلا الْمُطَهَّرُونَ

*This is indeed a noble Qur'an, in a guarded Book, no one touches it except the pure ones.* (56:77-79)

The noble Qur'an is in a hidden book and no one other than those who are purified can touch it. If we want to reach the depths of the Qur'an – or in other words, if we want to reach the deeper layers of the meaning of the Qur'an and experience the light of the Qur'an – we have to be purified.

Furthermore, we have to first be purified if we want to be taught wisdom, which is something so important that God says:

وَ مَن يُؤْتَ الْحِكْمَةَ فَقَدْ أُوتِيَ خَيْراً كَثِيراً وَ مَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلا أُوْلُواْ الأَلْبَاب

*.....and he who is given wisdom, is certainly given an abundant good. But none takes admonition except those who possess intellect.* (2:269)

Therefore, in contrast to the prayer of Abraham (a) and Ishmael (a), in the three places in which God refers to the task of the Prophet (s), He mentions purification before teaching the Book and wisdom. This shows how extremely important it is and explains once again why God says: *One who purifies it is certainly felicitous, and one who betrays it certainly fails.* (91:9-10)

In addition, even when He refers to the Prophet's task of collecting *khums*, charity, and alms from people, God says:

خُذْ مِنْ أَمْوالِهِمْ صَدَقَةً تُطَهِّرُهُمْ وَتُزَكِّيهِم بِها

*Take charity from their possessions to cleanse them and purify them thereby* (9:103)

There are many other verses of the Qur'an about *tazkīyah*.[3]

Thus, we understand that the notion of purification of the soul is very important in Islam and it relates to our relationship with ourselves. The reason for such a great emphasis on self-purification is the fact that God is the Most Pure and the Most Perfect, and it is only by purification of the soul that we can achieve our ambition of getting close to Him.

### Purification of the Soul in Contrast to Strengthening It

In Islamic thought we have the concept of purification of the soul rather than strengthening the soul. We are not supposed to make our soul powerful so that we can do extraordinary things as some other spiritual schools may teach. In Islam, it is important to have a pure soul which is tranquil and obedient. Whether we are able to do extraordinary acts or not is not important for us because although God does grant such powers to people with whom He is pleased, these are not at all important for someone who is a servant of God. A servant of God is not someone who purifies his soul so that he can read people's minds or do strange things or engage in fortune-telling. It is not

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[3] Refer to a paper entitled *The Significance of Self-Control and Self-Purification* by the author of this book, Dr. Shomali, which can be found online at http://messageofthaqalayn.com/37-significance.pdf. In it, he explains the concept of purity of the soul and the connection between giving alms and purity of the soul.

correct to do any good action with the intention of gaining such powers. This type of action is not serving God but is serving our own desires to be special, famous, and powerful. For this reason it is not right. Our aim should be to purify ourselves in order to be at the service of God who is the Most Pure and Most Perfect being.

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**Summary**

1. The second group of virtues consists of those concerning our relationship with ourselves. The first of these is purification of the soul, *tazkīyah al-nafs*, which is an expression taken from the Qur'an itself.

2. According to the Qur'an, the one who purifies his soul becomes happy and prosperous, whilst on the other hand, the one who fails to purify his soul and pollutes it will fail and will lose everything.

3. The first and lowest level of the soul is *al-nafs al-ammārah* (the commanding soul) which commands us to do bad things.

4. Then, after resisting against the temptations of the soul, we reach a level where our soul becomes *al-nafs al-lawwamah*, the blaming soul, which blames us when we do something wrong. This means that progress has been made because the soul which was previously commanding us to do wrong

things is now blaming us if we do them. After this, the soul becomes *al-nafs al-mutma'innah*, the tranquil soul, which is a soul that remembers God all the time, is connected to God, and has become pure.

5. The Prophet (s) had many tasks but one of his major tasks was to purify believers.

6. We have to be purified if we want to reach the depths of the Qur'an, to experience the light of the Qur'an, and to be taught wisdom.

7. In Islamic thought we have the concept of purification of the soul, not strengthening the soul. We are not supposed to try to make our soul powerful so that we can do extraordinary things as some other spiritual schools may encourage. In Islam it is important to have a pure soul which is tranquil and obedient.

# Lesson Thirteen:

# Truthfulness

## Introduction

In our study of the virtues related to one's relationship with oneself, we previously talked about the necessity for self-control and self-purification. Now we want to talk about another virtue related to one's relationship with oneself: truthfulness. In this lesson we will first explain the concept of truthfulness as a quality independent of one's life in society. Then, with reference to verses of the Qur'an and some hadiths, we will explain the importance of truthfulness in our social life and expand on its social implications. Finally, we will reflect further on this concept.

## Truthfulness as a Quality Independent of One's Social Context

Although it may appear that truthfulness is primarily related to our relationship with other people or with God, it seems that we can also argue that truthfulness is a quality which can exist within us even if we live alone and are concerned only with ourselves. Of course, no one can ever be completely alone because God is always there, but we can reflect on our

relationship with ourselves independently from other people, society, and social life.

For example, we might consider a particular person to be knowledgeable. This is a quality of that person even when they are isolated from others, although of course existentially no one is really alone. However, if that person is considered to be a person possessing this quality regardless of the relationships which they may or may not have with other people and with God, calling them knowledgeable still makes sense.

Truthfulness is similar because we can even be truthful with respect to ourselves. On the other hand, sometimes we are not even honest with ourselves because we deceive ourselves, tell ourselves lies, and are in a state of self-denial with respect to our own faults. Thus, truthfulness is a quality which can exist even when we are considering a person individually, independent of their social context.

Now we will study some Qur'anic verses and hadiths on the subject.

**Truthfulness and Piety**

In chapter 33, verse 70 of the Qur'an, God says:

يا أَيُّها الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ اتَّقُوا اللهَ وَ قُولُواْ قَوْلا سَدِيدًا

*O you who believe, be aware of God and speak only the truth.* (33:70)

The two instructions which are given in this verse are to have piety (*taqwā*)[1] and to tell the truth. Telling the truth comes next to *taqwā*, which in itself is a very important quality. There is no doubt that according to the Qur'an, *taqwā* is something which brings all good things together and is very essential to mankind's progress and perfection. After asking us to have *taqwā*, God tells us that we should tell the truth. This indicates that there is a close connection between *taqwā* and telling the truth. It also shows us that telling the truth is so important that it is mentioned immediately after asking for *taqwā*, which is a general concept. Therefore, truthfulness is not something marginal and unimportant, but rather it is fundamentally and extremely important to tell the truth.

## Necessity of Being with Truthful People

In verse 119 of chapter 9 God says:

يا أَيُّها الَّذِينَ ءامَنُواْ اتَّقُوا الله وَكُونُواْ مَعَ الصَّادِقِين

*O you who have faith! Be wary of God, and be with the Truthful.* (9:119)

[1] Listed in some translations as "to be God-fearing" or "to be aware or conscious of God."

As mentioned earlier, it is very important to have *taqwā*. This is a necessity and is repeated in both verses. However, in the previous verse (33:70) we also had the notion of telling the truth since the verse told us to speak only the truth. In order to avoid the misconception that perhaps truthfulness only means telling the truth, in this verse God makes it clear that telling the truth, for example verbally, is not the end of the story. To tell the truth is the first step to becoming truthful. After this we need to become a member of the community of the truthful.

What does it mean to need to be with truthful people? Firstly, it means that it is not enough simply to tell the truth; rather, we have to "become truthful,"' which is much more than merely telling the truth. Secondly, it shows that this is something which should be achieved by being an active member of the community of the faithful, by uniting with those who are truthful. This is not something which we can do individually whilst at the same time disregarding our social responsibilities – although, as we explained previously, the concept of truthfulness makes sense even if we are alone. In Islamic thought, truthfulness comprises two things: to try to be truthful and to unite with those who are truthful. Therefore, to be a completely truthful person we cannot exist in a vacuum; we have to join with other people.

### Who are the Truthful?

In the first instance, those who are truthful are the prophets because they have been chosen by God due to being truthful. After this come those who are appointed by God as leaders, such as Imams and very holy and pious people. We have to seek out such people and join them. This has to be a collective initiative because although the virtue itself is something which everyone should achieve personally, in addition to this, we also have a responsibility to identify those who have already established it in themselves. By following them, being with them, and trying to resemble them, we can ensure that we make progress in getting closer to God. This is of utmost importance.

We should realise that we have leaders who have established this truthfulness in themselves and so we should follow them. We have friends, allies, and associates who advise us concerning the truth and we in turn should advise them about truth. Therefore, we ought to seek out good leaders and true believers with whom to associate.

### Social Implications of Being Truthful

Although in many places in the Qur'an the emphasis is placed on *imān* (faith) and *al-'amal al-sālih* (righteous deed), the Qur'an itself clearly states that these two then have immense social implications. We also have social relationships and responsibilities to observe.

In Chapter *Al-'Asr,* God says:

وَ الْعَصْرِ إِنَّ الانسَانَ لَفِى خُسْرٍ

*By Time! Indeed man is in loss* (103:1-2)

Moment by moment, our life and time in this world, which is our most important and precious asset, is continuously slipping away. Having this life enables us to achieve guidance and work for happiness in the hereafter. Life in this world is the foundation for achieving everlasting felicity; it is our main asset. With the passage of time, we lose our physical powers and sometimes even our mental powers, so we have to understand that we are living in a state of loss. This is like a shopkeeper whose capital is the stock in their shop. They have to pay rent, taxes, and bills for electricity, gas, telephone, and so on. Employees also have to be paid. Therefore, they will not gain anything unless they gain more profits. If all they can manage to do is use up their capital, they will only incur losses and sooner or later they will become bankrupt.

Accordingly, in the Qur'an God says:

إِلا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَ عَمِلُواْ الصَّالِحَاتِ

*...except those who have faith and do righteous deeds* (103:2)

**a) Associate with Others in Society.**

Having faith and doing righteous deed are extremely good, but they are not enough. Unfortunately, sometimes we have a very limited understanding of faith (*imān*) and righteous deed (*al-'amal al-sālih*). We restrict them to the personal, individual realm when this is actually not enough. *Imān* and righteous deeds have to be extended to one's social life. At the same time, of course a person can be a *mu'min*, a faithful believer, and perform righteous deeds while he is alone.

Imagine a person who is living alone on an island, in a desert, or in a cave. It is certainly possible for him to be a *mu'min* and perform righteous deeds even if there is no one else present; at least they can do this between themselves and God, or between themselves and their environment. There is not necessarily a need for a society because a person can still be *muttaqī*, pious, while alone. However, we are not living in these kinds of conditions. Even if someone has the choice to do so, should they go and live alone, completely forgetting society, community, and family? It is possible to imagine individual circumstances due to which a person may choose or be forced to live alone; however, firstly, this cannot be generalized, and secondly, it is not advisable. The vast majority of human beings live in a social context. Therefore, to be *mu'min* and *muttaqī*, we have to fulfill our social responsibilities. For this reason, one of the main things which we must do is to identify people who are good

and associate with them in order to receive inspiration, energy, and luminosity from them.

**b) Advise each other to follow the truth.**

God says in the Qur'an:

وَ تَوَاصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَ تَوَاصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ

*And [they] enjoin one another to [follow] the truth and enjoin one another to patience.* (103:3)

It is so important to be truthful that God says that one of the requirements of being safe from loss is that we should advise one another to follow the truth. The word *tawāsaw* means "mutual advising."[2] Therefore, believers are those who help and advise each other; they enjoin and encourage one another to observe good, and they forbid and discourage each other from doing anything bad and evil.

**c) Advise each other to be patient.**

Furthermore, the second part of the verse is also very important: "*And [they] enjoin one another to patience.*" (103:3) We cannot achieve anything important without patience. Important things are costly; they demand a high price to be paid for them. We need to be patient and have control over our emotions in order to avoid becoming angry. We should

[2] *Tawāsaw* is in the form of *tafā'ul*. In Arabic, the main meaning of the form *tafā'ul* is mutual cooperation in something. Therefore, *tawāsaw* which is from the root *wasī* (to advise), means mutual advising.

be constantly patient and persistent; we should not give up, even if sometimes we face many challenges. Sometimes it may take years to finally witness the results and fruits of our actions.

God says that those people who have faith, do righteous deeds, and advise each other concerning truth and patience will be saved from loss. Thus, it can be seen that there is a social relationship which plays an important role in being saved from loss. This is very similar to the verses in Chapter *Al-Tawbah*: *Be wary of God, and be with the Truthful.* (9:119)

**d) Advise each other to be merciful.**

There is a verse in Chapter *Al-Balad* which says that the believers are those who advise one another and ask each other to observe patience and mercifulness.

ثُمَّ كَانَ مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَ تَوَاصَوْاْ بِالصَّبرِ وَتَوَاصَوْاْ بِالْمَرْحَمَة

*.....while being one of those who have faith and who enjoin one another to patience and enjoin one another to compassion.* (90:17)

This is very interesting. In Chapter *Al-'Asr*, *tawāsaw* is mentioned with respect to truth and patience. Here we have *tawāsaw* mentioned with respect to patience and being merciful. It is very important that we should ask each other to be compassionate and merciful. This demonstrates the value of being merciful in Islamic thought.

There are many more Qur'anic verses about truthfulness. Now I would like to refer to a hadith about being truthful.

One of the companions of the Prophet (s) was Ma'ādh b. Jabal. When the Prophet (s) appointed him as the governor of Yemen, he told him:

> أُوصِيكَ بِاتِّقَاءِ اللهِ وَ صِدْقِ الْحَدِيثِ وَ أَدَاءِ الْأَمَانَةِ وَ خَفْضِ الْجَنَاحِ وَ الْوَفَاءِ بِالْعَهْدِ
>
> I command you to fear God, tell the truth, deliver trusts, be lenient, and keep your promises![3]

As a governor, these values are enormously important and must be observed. Of course, these are virtues which every person should observe but are of even more importance for those who have positions of responsibility and influence.

### Reflection on the Concept of Truthfulness

We have to begin with telling the truth, but this is only the first step. In addition to telling the truth, we should believe in the truth, accept the truth, and commit ourselves to the truth.

A person who tells the truth but does not actually believe in it is not a truthful person, like, for example, the hypocrites

[3] *Irshād al-Qulūb ila al-Swāb* , vol. 1, p. 73

(*munāfiqīn*) at the time of the Prophet (s) who did not believe at all.

In Chapter *Al-Munāfiqīn*, God says:

إِذَا جَاءَكَ الْمُنَافِقُونَ قَالُواْ نَشْهَدُ إِنَّكَ لَرَسُولُ اللهِ واللهُ يَعْلَمُ إِنَّكَ لَرَسُولُهُ و اللهُ يَشْهَدُ إِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ لَكَاذِبُون

*When the hypocrites come to you they say, 'We bear witness that you are indeed the Messenger of God.' God knows that you are indeed His Messenger and God bears witness that the hypocrites are indeed liars.* (63:1)

The hypocrites said that Prophet Muhammad (s) was *Rasūl Allah*, the Messenger of God. This was both a lie and not a lie. It was not a lie because what they said was indeed true: the Prophet (s) was in reality the Messenger of God. On the other hand, it was a lie because they said that they bore witness that the Prophet (s) was the Messenger of God but they did not actually believe it.

Furthermore, sometimes we say the truth and believe in it but we do not act upon it. If we tell people not to cheat or backbite, or not to be greedy or jealous, we are telling the truth; however, if we do not put these things into practice ourselves, then again we are not truthful. This is like a doctor who says that smoking is harmful and believes this

but still smokes. Such a doctor is not observing the requirement of the knowledge that he has.

Therefore, our scholars say that sometimes we have truthfulness of speech and sometimes we have truthfulness of the heart. Sometimes we merely say a word, a sentence, or a statement which is true or false, but sometimes we say what we actually believe or do not believe. Thus we have to tell the truth, believe in the truth, and observe and implement the truth. We must at the very least have the intention of following the truth even if we are not actually able to do so.

Those who observe the truth in every aspect are called *siddīq*,[4] the most truthful. We find this concept of *siddīq* in the Qur'an.

For example, God says:

وَ اذْكُرْ فِى الْكِتَابِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ إِنَّهُ كَانَ صِدِّيقًا نَّبِيًّا

*And mention in the Book Abraham. Indeed he was a truthful one, a prophet.* (19:41)

In addition, God says about Lady Mary:

وَ أُمُّهُ صِدِّيقَةٌ

*And his (Jesus's) mother was a truthful one.* (5:75)

[4] This is singular. Its plural form is *siddīqīn*.

Furthermore, when God talks about four groups of people upon whom He has bestowed His blessing, who are on the right path, and whom we should follow, God says:

وَ مَن يُطِعِ اللهَ وَ الرَّسُولَ فَأُولَئِكَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ أَنعَمَ اللهُ عَلَيهِم مِّنَ النَّبِيِّنَ وَ الصِّدِّيقِينَ وَ الشُّهَداءِ وَ الصَّالِحِينَ وَ حَسُنَ أُولَئِكَ رَفِيقًا

*Whoever obeys God and the Apostle they are with those whom God has blessed, including the prophets and the truthful, the martyrs and the righteous, and excellent companions are they!* (4:69)

Those who obey God and obey the Prophet (s) are with the people upon whom God has bestowed His mercy. These are those people to whom we refer to in Chapter *Al-Hamd:*

اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُستَقِيمَ صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنعَمْتَ عَلَيهِمْ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيهِمْ وَ لاالضَّالِّينَ

*Guide us on the straight path, the path of those whom You have blessed, such as have not incurred Your wrath nor are astray.* (1:6-7)

These people are the prophets (a), the witnesses, the most truthful people, and the righteous people. Of course, all these qualities can exist in one person. Prophet Muhammad (s), for example, was a prophet, a witness, the most truthful, and righteous. However, other people may only have some of these qualities. These four qualities are the most

outstanding qualities. Whoever has even one of them is on the Right Path, but naturally there are different levels which can be achieved. However, the one who can be considered *siddīq* is the person who is completely in compliance with the truth, in every way.

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Summary

1. Truthfulness is mostly about our relationship with other people or with God; however, it seems that we can argue that truthfulness is a quality that can exist even if someone lives alone and is concerned only with themselves. This is because one can be truthful even with respect to oneself.

2. According to the Qur'an, *taqwā* (piety) is what brings all good things together and is very essential to mankind's progress and perfection. Therefore, after asking for *taqwā*, God says that we should tell the truth.

3. To tell the truth is the first step to being truthful, but after this we have to become a member of the community of the truthful. This means that it is not enough to simply tell the truth; one has to become entirely truthful.

4. In the first instance, those who are truthful are the prophets who have been chosen by God due to being truthful. Then there are those who are appointed by God as

leaders, such as Imams and holy people, whom we should seek out and join.

5. It is so important to be truthful that God says that to be safe from loss, we should advise each other to truthfulness

6. In Chapter *Al-'Asr,* we find the word *tawāsaw* (advising one another) mentioned with respect to truth and patience.

In Chapter *Al-Balad,* we find *tawāsaw* mentioned with respect to patience and being merciful.

7. If one tells the truth but does not believe in it, one is not truthful. Furthermore, if one believes in the truth but still does not put it into practice, one is not truthful.

8. Sometimes we have truthfulness of speech and sometimes truthfulness of the heart. Sometimes we say a word, sentence, or a statement which is true or false and sometimes we say what we actually believe or do not believe.

9. The person who is considered to be *siddīq* is the one who is completely in compliance with the truth in every way.

## Lesson Fourteen:

## Humility

### Introduction

Another quality with which we need to equip ourselves is humility. In this lesson, we will explain this concept and its opposite (arrogance) according to the Qur'an and Islamic teachings. Then we will refer to humility as a characteristic of believers. Finally, we will mention some examples of humility in the life of the Prophet (s) and the Ahl al-Bayt (a).

### Our Absolute Dependence on God

To be humble means to strengthen our understanding of our profound need for God and to achieve a sense of complete reliance on Him. In other words, in order to understand what our attitude should be with regard to this trait, we should become aware of our position in this world.

We are absolutely dependent on God. In the Qur'an, God says:

يا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ أَنتُمُ الْفُقَرَاءُ إِلَى اللهِ وَ اللهُ هُوَ الْغَنِيُّ الْحَمِيد

> *O mankind! You are the ones who stand in need of God, and God, He is the All- Sufficient, the All-Laudable.* (35:15)

We are all creatures of God and all the things we appear to possess are in reality God's possessions; He has given them to us out of His mercy. We are in need of God to give us energy, life, and indeed anything and everything else – whether small or great – which we need to continue with our lives.

Imam Husayn (a) prays to God thus:

> فبأيّ شَيْءٍ أستَقبلُکَ يا مَوْلایَ أبِسَمْعِی أمْ بِبَصَری أمْ بِلِسانِی أمْ بِيَدِی أمْ بِرِجْلِی أليْسَ كُلّها نِعَمُکَ عِنْدِی
>
> By which thing can I now meet You, O my Master? Can I come with my ears, my sight, my tongue, my hands, my feet? Is it not the case that all of these are your blessings which you have given me?[1]

Elsewhere Imam Husayn (a) says:

> إلهی أنا الفَقيرُ فی غِنای فَكَيْفَ لا أكونُ فَقيراً فی فَقْری

[1] *Bihār al-Anwār,* vol. 95, p. 222.

> O My Lord! I am poor in my richness so how can I not be poor in my poverty? [2]

Whatever we have is a sign of our need, a sign of our dependence. What about that which we do not have? For creatures like us, to claim to be significant and expect everyone to respect us and to be at our service is sheer arrogance.

**Lack of Humility**

Humility is the opposite of arrogance. A person who possesses this trait believes themselves to be in an elevated position when in reality they are not. Arrogance is one of the most vicious traits that a person can possess. On the other hand, humility occupies such an important role in a person's success that a lack of it is said to be the reason for one of the greatest failures in history. When God talks about the story of creation and the way in which Satan failed to pass his test, God says:

> أَبى وَ اسْتَكْبَرَ وَ كانَ مِنَ الْكافِرين
>
> *....he refused and acted arrogantly and he was one of the faithless.* (2:34)

The reason Satan refused to prostrate in front of Adam (a) when God asked him to do so was that he was arrogant.

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[2] Ibid., p. 225.

In another place in the Qur'an, God addresses Satan thus:

أَسْتَكْبَرْتَ أَمْ كُنْتَ مِنَ الْعالين

*Are you arrogant, or are you [one] of the exalted ones?* (38:75)

Hence, in Islamic traditions there is a beautiful teaching which says that we should never think that we are better than any other person. Even if we see people committing very bad actions, we should not think that we are better than them since there may be some good qualities in them which we do not know about and, more importantly, because people may have a good trait in their heart which would help them repent. On the other hand, there may be a trait in our heart which would sooner or later manifest itself and ruin all the good deeds that we have done. The reason Satan refused to prostrate in front of Adam (a) lies with a hidden trait which he had possessed throughout his life right up until that point; it was a fault in him that led to his disobedience despite his very long history of worshipping God.

In the verse mentioned above, God stated that Satan suffered from a false belief about himself; he regarded himself as very important and special, and so he had become arrogant as well as ungrateful. When the time came to be tested, he failed the test and disobeyed God because of that very trait which he had not removed from himself. This happened even though he was someone who had been

worshipping God for 6,000 years. In *Nahj al-Balāghah,* Imam Ali (a) says that it is not known [to normal people] whether these years were of the years of this world or the years of the hereafter.[3] According to the Qur'an, every year of the hereafter is equal to one thousand years in this world.[4]

If one year in the hereafter is equivalent to 1,000 years in our timescale, then 6,000 years in the hereafter would amount to a remarkable number of years during which Satan had worshipped God. However, despite this vast amount of time spent in worship, he did not achieve servitude and this caused him to fail.

This teaches us that even if we were to have worshipped God for 6,000 years, it would still be possible for us to make a mistake and fail, thereby ruining everything we had previously done. Therefore, we should never think that we are better than others just because we have been worshipping for a mere 30 or 40 years.

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[3] *Nahj al-Balāghah (Subhi Salih),* p. 287. The original text is as follows:

لايُدرَى أمِنْ سِنِى الدُّنيَا أمْ مِنْ سِنِى الآخِرَة

[4] This has been mentioned, for example, in verse 47 of chapter 22:

وَإِنَّ يَوْمًا عِندَ رَبِّكَ كَأَلْفِ سَنَةٍ مِّمَّا تَعُدُّون

*Indeed a day with your Lord is like a thousand years of your reckoning.* (22:47)

## Humility is a Characteristic of a Servant of God

Servants of God do not feel superior towards other people. They do not reply in a wrong manner even if people behave badly towards them. Furthermore, they do not find it hard to respond in a merciful way with good and pleasant words. Firstly, they do this because it is good for them and it is what their sense of honour requires. A person who has honour, dignity and nobility never uses indecent and bad words or expressions. Secondly, it is also better with respect to the other person. If someone thinks that they are right and that the other person has made a mistake, they should speak politely with them because then there is a chance that the other person may realise that they made a mistake. They may reflect on what has happened and sooner or later come and ask to be forgiven. However, if we respond to a person who has verbally insulted us in a similar or worse manner, the chances of that person realising their mistake and changing are greatly reduced.

There is a verse in the Qur'an regarding the behaviour of believers which says:

وَ عِبادُ الرَّحْمنِ الَّذينَ يَمْشُونَ عَلَى الأَرْضِ هَوْناً وَ إِذا خاطَبَهُمُ الْجاهِلُونَ قالُوا سَلاما

*The servants of the All-Beneficent are those who walk humbly on the earth and when the ignorant address them, say," Peace!"* (25:63)

It is important to note that the verb "walk" in the above verse is used as an example of all actions carried out during the day. The reason that this particular verb is used may be because those who are arrogant even display their arrogance in the way in which they walk and appear in public.

Thus, a true servant does everything with humility. Even when someone challenges them and says bad things to them, they do not get angry but instead remain tranquil and patient, and they offer "salām" which means "May God's peace be with you."

On the other hand, verse 18 of chapter 31 says:

وَ لا تُصَعِّرْ خَدَّکَ لِلنَّاسِ وَ لا تَمْشِ فِی الأَرْضِ مَرَحاً إِنَّ اللهَ لا یُحِبُّ کُلَّ مُخْتالٍ فَخُور

*Do not turn your cheek disdainfully from the people, and do not walk exultantly on the earth. Indeed Allah does not like any swaggering braggart.* (31:18)

So God does not love those who feel superior to others and are proud of themselves.

Therefore, humility is one of the very important and fundamental qualities which we need to achieve, and we should be very careful not to allow any trace of arrogance to remain in ourselves.

In the Qur'an God says:

تِلْکَ الدَّارُ الآخِرَةُ نَجْعَلُها لِلَّذینَ لا یُریدُونَ عُلُوّاً فِی الأَرْضِ وَ لا فَساداً وَ الْعاقِبَةُ لِلْمُتَّقین

*(As for) that future abode, We assign it to those who have no desire to exalt themselves in the earth nor to make mischief. And the good end is for those who guard (against evil).* (28:83)

If any real superiority exists in a particular person, it is not due to their worldly position, reputation, money, followers, or friends; rather, it comes from being more humble and closer to God.

The important point to notice here is that the result of humility for the sake of God is that when someone feels that they are the neediest person in the sight of God, it is then that God makes them the richest of people.

There is a beautiful hadith which says:

فَإِنَّ مَنْ تَواضَعَ لِلّهِ رَفَعَهُ الله

Indeed, the one who tries to be humble for the sake of God, God will elevate him.[5]

This hadith teaches us that in order to be elevated by God, we have to be humble. Therefore, a person who has been elevated must have been humble, otherwise they would not

[5] *al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, p.122

have been raised up by God. Of course, people may also elevate us by giving us power or money, or by making us a president or a minister, but this does not mean that we have been raised up by God. Without humility, it is impossible to be elevated by God to the higher levels of perfection and closeness to Him.

**Humility of the Prophet (s) and the Ahl al-Bayt (a)**

One of the most important qualities of Prophet Muhammad (s) was his humility and it was through this that he managed to reach the level of being a true servant of God, a position that is superior to being a messenger of God as seen in the phrase:

أشهَد أنَّ مُحَمَّداً عَبدُهُ وَ رَسولُه

I bear witness that Muhammad is a servant of God and His messenger.

The Prophet (s) was the most humble person and this led him to be chosen by God as his prophet. However, he never claimed any form of superiority for himself. He was even very careful not to appear different from other people and he did not have any special kind of arrangements for his daily living. Many people in Madinah lived in a better situation materially than did the Prophet (s). He did not have a palace or an expensive office, and he would either meet people in his house or in the masjid. He used to sit as part of a circle of people in a gathering and on many occasions

those who had come from other cities to Madinah to meet him for the first time were not able to identify him in the masjid without asking other people. They may have expected to find someone who wore special clothes and who sat in a special place surrounded by security guards, but the Prophet (s) would always sit alongside other people and he did not wear distinctive clothing. He was always available to people and he spent most of his time listening to them, so much so that in the Qur'an God says:

وَ مِنْهُمُ الَّذِينَ يُؤْذُونَ النَّبِيَّ وَ يَقُولُونَ هُوَ أُذُنٌ قُلْ أُذُنُ خَيْرٍ لَكُمْ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَ يُؤْمِنُ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَ رَحْمَةٌ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَ الَّذِينَ يُؤْذُونَ رَسُولَ اللهِ لَهُمْ عَذابٌ أَلِيمٌ

*Among them are those who torment the Prophet, and say, 'He is an ear.' Say, 'An ear that is good for you. He has faith in God and trusts the faithful, and is a mercy for those of you who have faith.' As for those who torment the Apostle of God, there is a painful punishment for them.* (9:61)

Prophet Muhammad (s) listened to people and spoke to them. He played with children and was ready to help anyone. He never believed or said that he was special, and even after all the victories he achieved for the Muslim nation, he attributed all that success to God alone; he did not claim anything to be from himself. Of course, we know that the Prophet (s) is very special. He is the most beloved person in

the sight of God and the closest person to Him. The quality of the knowledge, piety, patience, generosity, and mercy which he possessed were all unique. But as far as he was concerned, there was nothing special about him. He sincerely believed that he was the poorest of the poor and in the greatest need of God's help, support, and guidance.

There are numerous instances of such humble and patient behaviour in the life of the Prophet (s) and the Ahl al-Bayt (a). For example, on one occasion, someone, who had been psychologically poisoned by the influence of the deceitful propagation carried out by the Umayyad dynasty, went to Imam al-Hasan (a), accused him, and treated him with utmost disrespect. But the Imam (a) treated that person with such kind manners and courtesy that later he realised that he had made a big mistake. He saw for himself that contrary to what he had believed, the Imam's manner was not that of a stranger with no faith. He realised that such a person was truly a member of the household of the Prophet (s) and a man of noble character. Therefore, he went to the Imam (a) and asked for forgiveness saying, "Allah knows best where to place His apostleship!"[6] This is the result of humility.

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[6] *Manāqib Āl Abi Tālib (a),* vol. 4, p. 19. The original text is as follows:

أَنَّ شَامِيّاً رَآهُ رَاكِباً فَجَعَلَ يَلْعَنُهُ وَ الْحَسَنُ لَا يَرُدُّ فَلَمَّا فَرَغَ أَقْبَلَ الْحَسَنُ عَلَيْهِ فَسَلَّمَ عَلَيْهِ وَ ضَحِكَ وَ قَالَ أَيُّهَا الشَّيْخُ أَظُنُّكَ غَرِيباً وَ لَعَلَّكَ شُبِّهْتَ فَلَوِ اسْتَغْتَبْتَنَا أَعْتَبْنَاكَ وَ لَوْ سَأَلْتَنَا أَعْطَيْنَاكَ وَ لَوِ اسْتَرْشَدْتَنَا أَرْشَدْنَاكَ وَ لَوْ

**Summary**

1. To be humble means to strengthen our understanding of our profound and absolute need for God and to achieve a sense of complete reliance on Him.

2. Humility is the opposite of arrogance, which is the characteristic that caused Satan to be sent out of heaven after thousands of years of worship. As explained in the Qur'an, Satan refused to prostrate before Adam (a) because of his arrogance.

3. In Islamic teachings, we are strongly prohibited from thinking that we are better than other people.

4. Humility has been mentioned in the Qur'an as a characteristic of believers.

5. One of the most important qualities of Prophet Muhammad (s) was his humility and it was through this quality that he managed to reach the level of being a true

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اسْتَحْمَلْتَنَا حَمَّلْنَاکَ وَ إِنْ کُنْتَ جَائِعاً أَشْبَعْنَاکَ وَ إِنْ کُنْتَ عُرْیَاناً کَسَوْنَاکَ وَ إِنْ کُنْتَ مُحْتَاجاً أَغْنَیْنَاکَ وَ إِنْ کُنْتَ طَرِیداً آوَیْنَاکَ وَ إِنْ کَانَ لَکَ حَاجَةٌ قَضَیْنَاهَا لَکَ فَلَوْ حَرَّکْتَ رَحْلَکَ إِلَیْنَا وَ کُنْتَ ضَیْفَنَا إِلَی وَقْتِ ارْتِحَالِکَ کَانَ أَعْوَدَ عَلَیْکَ لأَنَّ لَنَا مَوْضِعاً رَحْباً وَ جَاهاً عَرِیضاً وَ مَالا کَبِیراً فَلَمَّا سَمِعَ الرَّجُلُ کَلامَهُ بَکَی ثُمَّ قَالَ أَشْهَدُ أَنَّکَ خَلِیفَةُ اللَّهِ فِی أَرْضِهِ اللهُ أَعْلَمُ حَیْثُ یَجْعَلُ رِسَالاتِه

servant of God – a position that is superior to being a messenger of God.

6. Studying the Qur'an and Islamic traditions leaves us with no doubt that we should try our best to gain humility and banish from our mind any thought that makes us feel superior to others. Hence, a person who has managed to control and subdue their arrogance will have a stronger sense of servitude towards God and will thus reach the highest status before Him.

## Lesson Fifteen:

## Moderation

### Introduction

Another quality which relates to one's relationship with oneself is moderation. Of course, this is a quality which also greatly affects one's relationships with other people and even with God, but initially it starts from within oneself. We know that God has created this world in a very balanced and measured way. In this lesson, we will study Islamic sources which mention moderation as an important virtue and also the Aristotelian approach to ethics which considers moderation to be the main criterion in ethics.

### Balance in Creation and Legislation

In the Qur'an, there are verses which refer to creation being balanced and measured. For example God says:

إِنَّا كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقْنَاهُ بِقَدَرٍ

*Indeed We have created everything in a measure.* (54:49)

Everything in this world has been created in a measure carefully decided by God. Nothing happens by chance, without planning or measuring.

God also says in the Qur'an:

> وَ السَّمَاءَ رَفَعَهَا وَ وَضَعَ الْمِيزَانَ أَلا تَطْغَوْا فِى الْمِيزَانِ وَ أَقِيمُوا الْوَزْنَ بِالْقِسْطِ وَ لا تُخْسِرُوا الْمِيزَانَ
>
> *And the heaven, He raised it high and He made the balance. That you may not be inordinate in respect of the measure. And keep up the balance with equity and do not make the measure deficient.* (55:7-9)

These verses clearly explain that everything has been created according to a very well-defined measure which God has designed. It is a very important point to note that not only has God observed this balance in His creation and generation of the world, but He has also asked us to keep a balance through the legislation and instructions which He has given us.

In our physical life, problems start when we do not observe balance either by not eating enough or eating too much, not sleeping enough or sleeping too much, or by not socializing with people or socializing too much. Everything that can be imagined has a certain balance, and if we go to extremes in either direction, it will create problems.

We also have to strike a balance in our life. If we do certain things too much or too little, it will create problems. Therefore, in addition to this general rule about creation and legislation, in the Qur'an God says that one has to achieve balance in two particular cases.

One instance is with regard to balance in giving charity. In verse number 67 of chapter 25, God says:

وَ الَّذِينَ إِذَا أَنْفَقُوا لَمْ يُسْرِفُوا وَ لَمْ يَقْتُرُوا وَ كَانَ بَيْنَ ذٰلِكَ قَوَاماً

*...[the servants of God are] those who, when spending, are neither wasteful nor tightfisted, and moderation lies between these [extremes].* (25:67)

The servants of God never go to extremes. They are neither extravagant nor miserly. They do not give too much so that they become poor and bankrupt – or for example, spend too much on one project, forgetting that there are other areas which also need help. We have to discover and establish priorities and then treat each priority in a very wise and rational way. What is imperative is to find a balance. Achieving this balance between two extremes is of crucial importance, even for things like giving money to charity which, although essential in Islam, still needs to be carried out in a balanced way.

Another case where balance is needed, which is mentioned in particular in the Qur'an, concerns our tone of voice while speaking.

In chapter 17, verse 110, God says:

وَ لا تَجْهَرْ بِصَلاتِکَ وَ لا تُخافِتْ بِها وَ ابْتَغِ بَيْنَ ذَالِکَ سَبِيلا

*Neither speak your prayer aloud nor speak it in a low tone! But seek a middle course between.* (17:110)

We should not speak too loud even when we want to speak to God in prayer. Unfortunately, sometimes we are not careful and when we say our prayers or recite Qur'an, we do it in a very loud voice. This may then annoy other people who may be trying to study or concentrate on something. We should not shout, even when we are alone, because we are speaking to God. When speaking to God, there is no need to speak either too loud or in a very low tone.[1]

These were just some specific examples where God has asked us to observe balance. In general, we should try to find balance in everything.

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[1] Of course, there are some legal requirements regarding the volume of one's voice when reciting daily prayers. The details can be learned from books of *fiqh*.

### Aristotelian Approach to Ethics

In the Aristotelian approach to ethics, which is welcomed by many Muslim ethicists, it has been argued that striking a balance is the most important requirement for a virtue and that a virtue is a virtue only when it is the middle position between two extremes. They speak about different faculties of the human soul – that each faculty has its own virtues and vices. The virtues are only to be found when we strike a balance and the vices are found when we miss the balance and go to extremes.

For example, they say that we have a faculty responsible for reasoning and rationality (*al-quwwah al-nātiqah* or *al-'aqlīyah*). There are people who almost never use their reasoning. They hardly ever argue or ask for explanations. When they hear something, almost always they either automatically accept it or they automatically reject it. For such people, accepting something as truth is merely a matter of liking or not liking it, and not a matter of reasoning and argument. On the other hand, there are people who are too critical and never believe anything no matter how good one's argument might be. They just want to question and argue for the sake of arguing. This is also not good. These people always remain in a state of doubt, suspicion, and skepticism. Therefore, what we need to do is to strike a balance between these two extreme positions and this is then called wisdom (*hikmah*). This wisdom appears when our faculty of

reasoning is functioning properly, in a very balanced and measured way.

Another faculty is the faculty of anger (*al-quwwah al-ghaḍabīyah*). This is the faculty responsible for our actions in the sense that it gives us courage and power, and urges and motivates us to do things. If we do not have such a faculty or if it does not function properly, then when danger and threats are present, or when we are attacked or put at risk, we do not do anything and our life is put in danger. Thus, this faculty is very important in motivating us to work to solve challenges and to protect ourselves from threats, risks, and enemies. However, if it becomes too active, another problem arises: we easily get angry with everyone. We want to attack everyone and we think everyone is actually or potentially an enemy, and we treat them accordingly. These are the kind of people who never show any kindness and are always fighting, angry, and aggressive. This is also not acceptable. When we find a balance, it is called bravery (*al-shajā'ah*).

Another faculty which we possess is the faculty responsible for our appetites (*al-quwwah al-shahawiyah*). We need to eat and drink in order to survive. If there was no appetite for eating and drinking, most people would not eat or drink. We rarely find people who eat and drink because they rationally know that they need to eat or drink; usually people eat and drink only when they feel hungry or thirsty. Of course, it is

good to refrain from eating or drinking when we are not feeling hungry or thirsty, but this is the way God has planned for our need for eating and drinking to manifest itself normally. If there was no appetite for eating and drinking, we would only eat food because our rational understanding would say that we should, and this would present many difficulties.

For example, imagine that a person wakes up in the morning and has to hurry to their office. They do not feel very hungry just as many people do not have an appetite for eating in the morning, and therefore they do not eat breakfast even though their body is in need. Furthermore, during the day they are also busy with work and because they do not feel hungry they may forget to eat and in this way harm their body. In order to warn us, God has given us appetites and many people only eat and drink due to these appetites, although a rational person would eat even without having an appetite if they knew that their body was in need.

However, on the other hand, there are people who may not have any desires at all. This is something which creates problems because, for example, in the case of a lack of sexual desire, such people would never get married, form a family, or have children. Should this become common and widespread, the continuation of human generations, and the beauties of families and family life, would cease to exist. There are so many challenges for someone who does not

have this appetite at all. On the other hand, if the same natural and necessary desire becomes too active, this creates other difficulties. Such a person would never be able to satisfy their desires and would seek more and more sexual gratification, which would create many additional problems. Therefore, finding the correct balance is crucial.

Thus, according to the Aristotelian approach to ethics, every faculty has its own middle position and balance, and when one strikes this balance, one has achieved the corresponding virtue. If someone achieves balance with respect to their faculty of reasoning, faculty of anger, and faculty of appetite, then they have achieved wisdom, bravery, and modesty (*'iffah*). Furthermore, this person would have gained justice (*'adalah*), which would mean that all of their faculties are functioning properly, in a balanced way.

As mentioned before, the Aristotelian view is welcomed by many Muslim scholars of ethics and we can find some evidence in support of it in the Qur'an and in the narrations of our religious leaders. The following hadith quoted from Imam al-Kazim (a) is one such instance:

خَيْرُ الأُمُورِ أَوْسَطُهَا

The best of affairs is what lies in the middle.[2]

[2] *al-Kafi*, vol. 6, p. 541

In addition, in the *Sermon of the Pious*, Imam Ali (a) says that one of the characteristics of the pious is that they are able to strike a balance in their conduct and manner.[3]

Of course, here there are some technical discussions in ethics which we cannot go into. However, whether we agree with the Aristotelian approach or not, and whether or not we can say that in Islam in all circumstances the middle path is promoted, in most cases, finding the middle position is a good criterion to be used.

In other words, we should never have *ifrāt* or *tafrīt,* meaning we should never go to extremes. Of course, there may be some qualities or actions regarding which it is not problematic to acquire the maximum amount of them as we are able, and doing so would even be recommended. For example, regarding remembrance of God, we previously said that there is a hadith which says everything has a limit apart from remembrance of God. So in this case it would make no sense to say that one has remembered God too much. Of course, it is reasonable to say this if, for example, remembrance of God is done in such a way that it leads to extremism, this is not good. For example, it is wrong if a person mistakenly thinks that remembering God means that

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[3] *Nahj al-Balāghah (Subhi Salih),* sermon 193, p. 303. The original text is as follows:

مَلْبَسُهُمُ الاقْتِصَادُ

in every meeting they attend they should only talk about God.

However, a believer can indeed remember God all the time and still manage their life in a proper way, just as God says in the Qur'an:

رِجالٌ لا تُلْهِيهِمْ تِجارَةٌ وَ لا بَيْعٌ عَنْ ذِكْرِ اللهِ

*There are people for whom neither business nor merchandise makes them forget God.* (24:37)

This does not mean that they avoid doing business or fail to progress in earning money. The point is that they carry out all the necessary activities of life and at the same time they remember God.

These were all examples to show that maintaining a balance is very important in every aspect of life. As individuals, and also as a community of the faithful, we should always try to establish this value in our life.

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**Summary**

1. Some verses of the Qur'an explain that everything has been created according to a clearly defined measure designed by God.

2. Not only has God observed this balance in His creation of the world, but He also has asked us to keep a balance through the legislation and the instructions which He has offered us.

3. We are also asked to strike a balance in our spiritual life.

4. In the Aristotelian approach to ethics, which is welcomed by many Muslim ethicists, it has been argued that to strike a balance is the most important requirement for a virtue, and that a virtue is a virtue only when it is the middle position between two extremes.

5. If someone achieves balance with respect to their faculty of reasoning, faculty of anger, and faculty of appetite, then they have achieved wisdom, bravery, and modesty. Furthermore, this means that they have achieved justice.

6. There may be some qualities or actions regarding which it is not problematic to acquire the maximum amount of them as we are able. For example, it is recommended in the Qur'an and hadith to remember God as much as possible.

## Lesson Sixteen:

## Patience

### Introduction

In the course of the previous lessons, different personal virtues related to one's relationship with one's self have been studied. The present lesson will be dedicated to the subject of patience. We will study verses of the Qur'an and also hadiths which talk about patience. We will also explain the concept of patience and discuss the three types of patience. Finally, we will talk about the position and reward of a patient person.

### Importance of Patience in the Qur'an and Hadith

To prove the importance of patience, it is sufficient to go through the verses of the Qur'an and the hadiths which talk about the significance of patience. We can begin with the following two verses of the Qur'an. In verse 153 of the second chapter of the Qur'an, we read:

يا أَيُّها الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ استَعِينُواْ بِالصَّبرِ وَ الصَّلَوةِ إِنَّ اللهَ مَعَ الصَّابِرِين

*O you who have faith! Take recourse in patience and prayer; indeed God is with the patient.* (2:153)

One should seek God's assistance through prayer, which is very important and is the best form of remembrance of God, and through patience. Although in some hadiths the patience mentioned here has been interpreted as fasting, this could be due to its role as the best example of patience and does not mean that patience is necessarily limited to fasting. It is through fasting that we can exercise and strengthen our patience. Thus, God says that we should seek assistance from patience and prayer.

The second verse which talks about patience is verse 200 of chapter 3 which says:

يا أَيُّها الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ اصبِروا وَ صَابِرُواْ وَ رَابِطُواْ وَ اتَّقُوا الله لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُون

*O You who believe! Be patient and excel in patience and remain steadfast and be careful of your duty to God that you may be successful.* (3:200)

In this verse, we have the verb *isbirū,* which means to have patience in one's personal life, and *sābirū,* which means to have patience in one's social life and as a community of patient people. It is not enough to be patient merely as individuals because we also need to have patience as a

quality in our community and in our interpersonal relationships.

### Concept of Patience

We should first discover what patience really means. Unfortunately, sometimes there is a misunderstanding and people think that having patience means to simply allow things to happen and not do anything – that a person should remain indifferent and tolerate the situation until matters are resolved. However, this is not the true meaning of patience. Patience means to carry out our responsibilities and to try to do our best to improve our situation or improve the condition of our own particular society, of human society in general, or of the whole world, including non-humans. Naturally, we will face challenges and problems in the process of doing our best to bring improvements; there is no great task which does not have problems attached to it. We cannot expect to do something great without going through difficulties and facing many challenges and problems. Patience means to not give up; to remain persistent and and focused on pursuing our ideals and goals without admitting defeat, getting angry, or, for example, getting overly excited and then doing the wrong things.

Thus, patience is a form of resistance against problems and it involves persistence and commitment. Each and every person who has a sacred goal remains patient. As students, if we were not patient we would not study, focus on learning,

or give up part of our rest and leisure for the sake of learning. We would not pursue a path which involves regularly attending classes, studying, taking notes, having discussions with friends, asking questions of our teachers, preparing for exams, reflecting on a subject, trying to be creative, and trying to write something – all of which need some kind of deep commitment and sacrifice. If we are not prepared and determined to do this, then either we will not learn anything or we will learn very little.

It is the same case with everything important because everything important requires sacrifice and persistence. Thus, a person who is patient is able to continue their struggle for improvement.

## Types of Patience

In the hadiths we find that *sabr* is of three types:[1]

**I. Patience with respect to acts of obedience (*al-sabr 'ala al-ta'ah*).**

We have many obligations and duties, and we require patience in order to perform them. For example, praying five times a day in all circumstances, whether at home or outside, travelling or not, healthy or ill, is something that needs

[1] *al-Kafi*, vol. 2, p. 91. The original text is as follows:
قَالَ رَسُولُ اللهِ (ص): الصَّبْرُ ثَلاثَةٌ صَبْرٌ عِنْدَ الْمُصِيبَةِ وَ صَبْرٌ عَلَى الطَّاعَةِ وَ صَبْرٌ عَنِ الْمَعْصِيَةِ

patience, especially for those who have not yet been able to taste the sweetness and beauty of prayer. For such people, prayer is a kind of burden and *taklīf* (obligation), and as we know, "There is no situation in which the obligation of prayer is removed."[2] Even a person who is about to draw their last breath should make their prayer, although in that situation, prayer may be reduced to uttering a single phrase; so the obligation is never fully removed.[3]

Fasting also means that one must restrain oneself from eating and drinking for a long period of time, which in some countries may amount to more than two thirds of the day, requiring greater patience. The same is true for giving alms – *zakāt* and *khums* – which are all instances of having patience with respect to an act of obedience.

**II. Patience with respect to acts of disobedience (*al-sabr 'an al-ma'siyah*).**

Another type of patience requires resisting the temptation to commit sinful actions. For example, a person who is suffering from hunger and has no money to buy food may

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[2] *Mustamsak al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā*, vol. 5, p. 447. The original text is as follows:

الصّلاة لاتُترکُ بحال

[3] Of course, in certain circumstances ladies are not required to perform daily obligatory prayers, but this is a special case. Except in that specific situation, in all circumstances men and women who meet all the requirements for being considered as mature and having understanding, must say their prayers and this needs patience.

be tempted to steal. Patience is then needed to refrain from such an action. The same is true with controlling what we say in times of anger, something which can prove to be difficult. All too often, people regret having said something or having made a decision at times of anger – all of which could have been prevented if patience had been preserved.

**III. Patience with respect to suffering (*al-sabr 'ala al-musībah*).**

In addition to being patient with respect to acts of obedience, in the sense of overcoming that which prevents us from performing them, and also with respect to acts of disobedience, in the sense of being strong enough to refrain from them, we also need to be patient with respect to the calamities, problems, and sufferings which we must endure. During our lifetime, it frequently happens that either we ourselves become ill or we see a loved one go through an illness that is very painful and terminal. Some people experience severe poverty, which affects all aspects of their life. Sometimes people are not treated properly by others. In any case, there are many situations which can lead to suffering, be it a lack of security or employment, emotional breakdown, or many other types of problems which can happen in our life as a result of which we may suffer. This is why a believer has to be patient and is required to be very strong.

There is a beautiful hadith which is as follows:

المؤمنُ كَالجَبَلِ الرّاسِخِ لا تُحَرِّكُهُ العَواصِف

The believer is like a firm mountain, even storms cannot move it.[4]

Although the problems we go through in life may be difficult, bitter, or painful, they should not cause a believer to be defeated. A true believer remains very strong, very hopeful, and very active at all times and under all circumstances. God has given us so much potential and so much power that it is possible for us to resist all problems and keep moving forward.

Therefore, we are in need of patience with respect to all three situations: when we want to do something obligatory, when we want to avoid something sinful, and when we are suffering.

### Reward for the Patient

There is great reward reserved for those who are patient, so much so that God says in the Qur'an:

إِنَّما يُوَفَّى الصّابِرُونَ أَجْرَهُمْ بِغَيْرِ حِسابٍ

[4] This is a very famous hadith; however, so far we have not been able to locate it in early collections of hadiths. The closest thing to it is what has been related as a description of Imam Ali (a) by Prophet Khiḍr (a) in *Manāqib Āl Abī Tālib (a),* vol. 2, p. 347. The original text is as follows:

كُنْتَ كَالْجَبَلِ الرَّاسِخِ لاتُحَرِّكُكَ الْعَوَاصِف

*Those who are patient will be rewarded without measure.* (39:10)

The reward which a patient person receives for their patience is not ten, a hundred, or even a thousand times greater than the single action it is based on; rather, God says that their reward will be immeasurable.

Finally, there are beautiful hadiths which indicate that the reward given to patient people will be even more than the reward given to martyrs. For example, Abu Hamzah al-Thumālī quotes Imam al-Sādiq (a) as saying:

مَنِ ابْتُلِيَ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ بِبَلاءٍ فَصَبَرَ عَلَيْهِ كَانَ لَهُ مِثْلُ أَجْرِ أَلْفِ شَهِيدٍ

Whosoever from amongst the believers bears a tribulation which befalls them patiently, has the reward of a thousand martyrs.[5]

One explanation for this could be that martyrs have given their life once for the sake of God, whereas the patient are those who have endured so many difficulties and calamities that it is as if they have died each and every day. It might be easier for them to die once as a martyr rather than endure these daily tragedies and difficulties, but nevertheless, they

[5] Al-*Kāfī*, vol. 2, p. 92

have remained patient and pleased with whatever God has decided for them.

Sometimes it is very difficult to remain patient when faced with all the problems, pressures, and challenges surrounding us. Sometimes someone who has died or was martyred faces fewer difficulties than the relatives who are left behind. The wife or children of a martyr who remain patient may gain an equal or even higher position than that martyr because they have sometimes suffered for years and yet they remained patient. Of course, if a martyr has also been patient during their lifetime then their reward would be even greater.

Thus, patience is such an important quality that God rewards us immeasurably for having it. It is such that it may even elevate us above those people who have offered their life for the sake of God. Furthermore, those who are patient and finally also offer their life in the way of God, will be counted amongst the very best of patient people.

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**Summary**

1. In the Qur'an, God tells believers to take advantage of prayer and patience when they want to seek assistance from Him.

2. Patience is a form of resistance against problems which will help the patient person continue on their path towards their goals despite all the challenges they may face.

3. Believers should establish patience both as individuals and as a community.

4. There are three types of patience. First, patience with respect to acts of obedience in the sense of overcoming whatever prevents us from performing them. Second, patience with respect to acts of disobedience in the sense of being strong enough to refrain from them. And third, patience with respect to the calamities and problems which happen in our lives.

5. A person who manages to remain patient with respect to all three types of patience will reach a level where their position will be higher than that of martyrs and the reward they will receive will be immeasurable.

## Lesson Seventeen:

# Suppression of Anger, Avoiding Suspicion and Controlling One's Tongue

### Introduction

Suppression of anger is another virtue which we need to achieve for our personal development. It is closely related to the virtue of patience studied in the previous lesson where it was stated that we have a faculty responsible for anger and, as necessary as this faculty is, sometimes we need to be patient and control it. However, although it is a facet of patience which has already been covered, due to its importance we have singled it out in order to emphasise it further. After this we will address the virtue of avoiding suspicion and will study what the Qur'an and narrations have to say about this. Finally, we will address the virtue of having control over our tongue, which, as explained in narrations, has significant outcomes.

### Suppression of Anger

Anger is not always discouraged. Sometimes we need to get angry in order to protect ourselves from threats. However, we need to examine the issue of when it is appropriate to

become angry and which actions are acceptable when we are angry. Both ends of the spectrum of anger are wrong; it is problematic if one never gets angry just as it is problematic if one is easily angered. It is a problem if a person becomes angry and loses control over their words and actions, whereas it is a good thing and indeed sometimes necessary for a person to become angry at an appropriate time whilst maintaining control over their words and actions.

For example, if a person is trying to kill us or to kill an innocent person in front of us, then we need to have a certain level of anger to be able to defend ourselves or the other person. If we are indifferent, we will not be able to act. In such circumstances we should indeed exercise our faculty of anger; however, this must be guided and regulated by our faculty of rationality. It is the use of reason which should determine the extent to which one becomes angry and what should be done in order to solve a problem.

Unfortunately, in many cases, what happens is that initially we become angry for appropriate reasons but instead of using our anger in a correct way, we overreact and then misuse it. For instance, we might see our child, spouse, sibling, or even a stranger doing something wrong and attempting to harm us, and we may become excessively angry and overreact. If we then do something that harms them, it is we who have now done something wrong. This is

where the concept of suppressing anger becomes meaningful.

Notice what God says about believers:

لا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَآنُ قَوْمٍ عَلى أَلاَّ تَعْدِلُوا اعْدِلُوا هُوَ أَقْرَبُ لِلتَّقْوى وَ اتَّقُوا اللهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِما تَعْمَلُون

*O you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety: and fear Allah. For Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do.* (5:8)

Believers must possess the good quality of being able to suppress their anger. They need to be in control of their anger even with respect to their enemies. It is very important to understand that we must control ourselves even when dealing with enemies.

In chapter 3, verses 133 and 134 of the Qur'an, God counts suppression of anger as a characteristic of pious people for whom Paradise has been prepared:

وَ سَارِعُواْ إِلىَ مَغْفِرَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ وَ جَنَّةٍ عَرْضُهَا السَّمَاوَاتُ وَ الْأَرْضُ أُعِدَّتْ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ الَّذِينَ يُنفِقُونَ فى السَّرَّاءِ وَ الضَّرَّاءِ وَ الْكَظِمِينَ الْغَيْظَ وَ الْعَافِينَ عَنِ النَّاسِ وَ اللهُ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِين

> *And hasten towards your Lord's forgiveness and a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, prepared for the God wary. Those who spend in ease and adversity, and suppress their anger, and (excuse the faults of) the people, and Allah loves the virtuous.* (3:133-134)

In order to enter heaven, one of the qualities we need is the ability to suppress our anger.

### Avoiding Suspicion

Another quality which is also very important to mention as a personal quality is being able to avoid suspicion. This quality or lack of it very frequently appears in society. However, it does not necessarily manifest itself outwardly but instead can be found in one's heart and thus it is counted as a personal quality.

Unfortunately, there are some people who very quickly and easily make negative judgments about other people. Sometimes they form an opinion that someone is a bad person merely by listening to a few words from them or after hearing inaccurate things about them from other people. They may jump to conclusions and make hasty judgments simply because they have seen something or met someone once.

As believers, we are asked to be very much in control of our words, our actions, and even our thoughts. We should be careful not to develop any kind of suspicion even in our thoughts.

In chapter 49, verse 12, God says:

> يا أَيُّهَا الَّذينَ آمَنُوا اجْتَنِبُوا كَثيراً مِنَ الظَّنِّ إِنَّ بَعْضَ الظَّنِّ إِثْمٌ
> *O you who have faith! Avoid much suspicion. Indeed some suspicions are sins* (49:12)

The point which can be understood from the above verse is that because suspicion is sometimes a sin, we have to avoid it completely. This can be clarified using an example. Suppose that there are a few cups of water and we know that at least one of them is poisoned but we don't know exactly which one is poisoned. There is a high risk that the cup we choose to drink from might be the poisoned one which would kill us. Therefore, we would naturally be cautious and avoid drinking from any of the cups. Of course, if it were possible to discover which cup is the poisoned one, there would be no need to avoid all of them. But the above example is not like this. The verse tells us that a similar scenario is true regarding suspicion. Suspicion is so destructive that God says we should avoid it altogether because unless we have a way to examine a particular case in order to become certain that our judgment is an accurate

and appropriate one, we could fall into the trap of having unfounded suspicions about someone or something.

There is a beautiful saying by Imam Ali (a) which says:

لاتَظُنَّنَّ بِكَلِمَةٍ خَرَجَتْ مِنْ أَحَدٍ سُوءاً وَ أَنْتَ تَجِدُ لَهَا فِي الْخَيْرِ مُحْتَمَلا

> Do not regard an expression uttered by any person as evil if you can find it capable of bearing some good.[1]

Sometimes a person says something which could be interpreted in more than one way. As long as there is even a slight possibility of interpreting what has been said in a positive way, we should do so and not make a judgment that that person meant something bad or wanted to hurt or offend us. We must make the utmost effort to convince ourselves that maybe that person meant something else, since it often happens that people say something which we find offensive but later on, when they explain what they really wanted to convey to us, we discover that in actuality, they meant no offense. Therefore, we should always be optimistic about people, and respect them. If they say that they did not mean any harm, we should accept what they say even supposing that person actually did mean something negative.

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[1] *Nahj al-Balāghah (Subhi Sālih),* p. 538, wise saying no. 360

Avoiding suspicion is very important for a successful social life, as well as a flourishing and strong community. It also facilitates personal comfort. If we start developing suspicions about other people and this becomes an ingrained habit, even if we do not act on them, our heart will suffer. We will over-think things and come to believe that we are surrounded by bad people. This is all preventable if we simply avoid baseless and groundless suspicions.

### Protecting the Tongue from Inappropriate Speech

Many people underestimate the significance of the tongue in our speech and conversations because it is very easy to speak. Even if someone is physically unable to move or even unable to move an object, they can still speak. Speaking may be one of the last things that ceases in many people's lives. Therefore, we take it for granted and fail to understand its significance. However, speaking is indeed one of the most crucial, fundamental, and influential things in our life. Sometimes a few simple words can change one's life for the better or for the worse. We may say something appropriate at the right time and in the right way which will give hope and direction to someone and from which they will benefit throughout their entire life. The opposite effect is also possible when we say something wrong and damage our own reputation or misguide someone who then suffers for the rest of their life as a result of our inappropriate words.

Therefore, we have to be very careful regarding our speech and conversations.

Prophet Muhammad (s) is quoted as saying:

نَجَاةُ الْمُؤْمِنِ فِي حِفْظِ لِسَانِهِ

The salvation of believers is in the protection of their tongue.[2]

In another hadith, Prophet Mohammad (s) said:

لايَسْتَقِيمُ إِيمَانُ عَبْدٍ حَتَّى يَسْتَقِيمَ قَلْبُهُ وَ لايَسْتَقِيمُ قَلْبُهُ حَتَّى يَسْتَقِيمَ لِسَانُه

The belief of a person cannot become firm unless his heart is firm, and his heart cannot be firm unless his tongue is firm and fully controlled.[3]

If there is one thing that we can learn from these narrations, it is that there is a close and direct relationship between controlling the tongue and having firm belief that will lead to salvation.

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[2] *al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, p. 114

[3] *Tanbih al-Khawātir wa Nuzhah al-Nawāẓir (Majmū'ah Warrām)*, vol. 1, p. 105

Once, a few people asked the Prophet (s) whether it is possible to go to hell because of what we have said. The Prophet (s) replied:

وَ هَلْ يَكُبُّ النَّاسَ عَلَى مَنَاخِرِهِمْ فِي النَّارِ إِلا حَصَائِدُ أَلْسِنَتِهِم

And will people not be thrown face down into the fire only on account of the harvest of their tongue?[4]

The Prophet's rhetorical question shows us the significance of the tongue and how we use it; it suggests that the only reason someone would fall face-first into the fire of hell is if he misuses his tongue. Therefore, we have to be very careful to use it properly and to avoid the harms which can be done with it. We have to watch our words very carefully and avoid any unnecessary talking, let alone sinful speech. Scholars have mentioned up to 70 different types of sins related to the tongue. Telling lies and backbiting are only two of them.

Let us end this lesson by mentioning a word of advice from Luqman the Wise who once said to his son:

إِنْ كُنْتَ زَعَمْتَ أَنَّ الْكَلامَ مِنْ فِضَّةٍ فَإِنَّ السُّكُوتَ مِنْ ذَهَبٍ

O my son! If you think that speech is silver, then surely silence is gold.[5]

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[4] *al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, p. 115
[5] *al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, p. 114

**Summary**

1. Suppression of anger is a form of patience.

2. On both ends of the spectrum, anger is wrong; it is problematic if one never gets angry just as it is problematic when one is easily angered. It is the use of reason which should determine to what extent one should become angry.

3. We should be careful not to develop any kind of suspicion – even in our thoughts, mind, or heart – because suspicion is sometimes a sin. This quality – or lack of it – appears very frequently in society. However, it can only be counted as a personal quality when it is in one's heart.

4. Protecting our tongue from inappropriate and sinful speech is one of the most significant virtues that is often underestimated due to the fact that talking is very easy.

5. According to Islamic narrations, there is a close and direct relationship between controlling the tongue and having firm belief that will lead to salvation.

## Lesson Eighteen:

## Thirst for Knowledge

### Introduction

Another quality which we need to achieve with regard to our personal development is to be knowledgeable. To pursue knowledge, to try to learn, and to increase our knowledge are all considered great virtues; in fact, they are regarded as obligatory. Knowledge is said to be a preferential factor in Islamic culture, meaning that a person with more knowledge is worthy of more respect and status.

### Significance of Knowledge in the Qur'an

There are several verses in the Qur'an about the significance of knowledge and the merits of knowledgeable people. There are also many narrations that mention these points. As always, we will start with what the Qur'an has to offer concerning knowledge. In chapter 39, verse 9, God says:

هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَ الَّذِينَ لا يَعْلَمُونَ

*Are those who know equal to those who do not know?*
(39:9)

It is clear from the rhetorical question asked in this verse that the Qur'an is telling us that it is not possible for those who know and those who do not know to be treated equally.

There are many things which people may believe to be important, but Islam has not considered them as significant or as reasons for the preferential treatment or elevation of a person. Ethnicity, skin colour, geographical location, lineage, friends, and financial situation, are all insignificant. These features, in and of themselves, are not important merits and preferences; they do not raise a person's status.

On the other hand, piety (*taqwā*) is something which is considered to be the reason for the elevation of people. God says:

يا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْناكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَ أُنْثى وَ جَعَلْناكُمْ شُعُوباً وَ قَبائِلَ لِتَعارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللهِ أَتْقاكُم

*O mankind! Indeed We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify yourselves with one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most God wary among you.* (49:13)

Therefore, we observe that according to Islamic culture, those who are pious are better than those who do not have piety (*taqwā*) at all or who have it to a lesser degree. In other

words, in Islamic culture, piety is the benchmark, not race, colour, ethnicity, and so on.

When studying the virtue of knowledge, we find that having knowledge can cause one person to be superior to another, as was stated in the verse we mentioned earlier. Those who have knowledge are not like those who have money or a good job or a high position. To reinforce this observation, we can refer to more verses of the Qur'an which point out the significance of knowledge and the knowledgeable.

We read the following in the Qur'an:

إِنَّما يَخْشَى اللهَ مِنْ عِبادِهِ الْعُلَماءُ

*Only those of God's servants having knowledge fear Him.* (35:28)

And also:

يَرْفَعِ اللهُ الَّذينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَ الَّذينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجاتٍ

*Allah raises those of you who have faith and those who have been given knowledge in ranks.* (58:11)

Therefore, gaining knowledge is certainly considered to be a very important achievement and, along with piety, a reason for preferential treatment. Of course, there is a difference between knowledge and piety in the sense that having piety is guaranteed to bring forth only good outcomes, whereas if knowledge is not used well and with correct intentions, it

can cause problems. Furthermore, a knowledgeable person who acts against piety or neglects it can cause more damage than a person with no knowledge. Thus, with regard to knowledge, there is a chance that it will be misused. In any case, we need to gain both knowledge and piety.

Knowledge is of two types in Islamic culture. It is necessary for everyone to seek one type but sufficient if only a certain section of society specializes in the other type. Examples of the latter are mathematics, physics, chemistry, engineering, and even many aspects of philosophy and of theology. A certain section of society should specialize in these branches of knowledge and then be responsible to take care of the needs of the rest of society in these subjects.

On the other hand, there is another type of knowledge which everyone must achieve. This is the knowledge which helps us to have a better understanding of God, His creation, ourselves, and what we are supposed to do. There are questions for which everyone must seek their own answers and which include researching such things as where we came from, where we are at the moment, where we are heading, what we should do to become happy and prosperous, and which rights we must observe.

### Significance of Knowledge in Hadiths

So far we have studied the significance of knowledge in the Qur'an. However, we find that knowledge is also highly

regarded in our hadiths and so we will now mention some examples which illustrate this point.

One example is the hadith of Prophet Muhammad (s) which reads:

طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ وَ مُسلِمَةٍ

Acquiring knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim, male and female.[1]

The Prophet (s) clearly says that every Muslim man and woman must pursue knowledge and learn. Even if the hadith had not mentioned both men and women, it would be clear that this refers to both of them because in Arabic, as in many other languages, when a point is made about Muslims or a group of people, it includes both men and women – unless there is evidence to suggest otherwise. However, in this case, in order to emphasise and show the significance of seeking knowledge, both men and women have been mentioned separately.

Another point in the hadith is that the Prophet (s) does not merely say that seeking knowledge is good; rather, he uses the term *farīḍah,* which means compulsory. Some people assume that religion is against seeking knowledge and they therefore fear progress and believe that knowledge should be avoided. Other people think that it is better to have

[1] *Miṣbāḥ al-Sharī'ah*, p. 13

knowledge. However, the Prophet (s) says that not only is it not bad and indeed better to seek and gain knowledge, but it is actually compulsory to do so.

Following on from this, certain questions could be raised. For example, where should we gain knowledge from? Should we learn only in our own town, which would mean that if there is no knowledge available in town – for example, if there is a lack of scholars and/or opportunities – then the obligation is therefore lifted?

Prophet Muhammad (s) answers this question in the following way:

اطْلُبُوا الْعِلْمَ وَلَوْ بِالصِّينِ

Seek knowledge even if you have to travel as far as China![2]

When we know the context and the environment in which this hadith was related, its significance becomes clearer. This hadith originates from more than a thousand years ago, when travelling to China (a country thousands of miles away from Makkah and Madinah), was a very difficult task. We can only begin to imagine the amount of time and effort required to undertake such a journey using the means of transport available at that time. Yet the Prophet (s) said that if the only place to gain knowledge is in China, then we even

[2] *Misbah al-Shari'ah*, p. 13

have to travel there in order to learn. Hence, in Islam there is no limit to learning, as far as the distance travelled is concerned.

The second question which needs answering is whether there is an age limit for acquiring knowledge; is seeking knowledge only an obligation on those who are young? Or are the middle-aged and the old included in this obligation?

Regarding this Prophet Muhammad (s) has said:

أُطلُبوا العِلمَ مِنَ المَهدِ إلى اللَّحدِ

Seek knowledge from [when you are in] the cradle to [when you are put in] the grave.[3]

From the very beginning of our life right up until its end we must be involved in learning. Therefore, even with regard to age there is no limit to seeking knowledge.

Another question which comes to mind concerns the kind of people to whom we should seek knowledge from. Of course, we should try to find teachers who are moral and pious since they will help us gain both knowledge and the morals needed to utilise that knowledge properly. However, there may be certain things which someone needs to know but there are no pious teachers in those particular fields. In this case, if someone is a person of understanding and

[3] *Nahj al-Fasāhah,* p. 218

discernment, and would not be misguided, confused, or affected by the bad morals of others, then they can learn or even should learn from non-pious people who have the required knowledge.

In this regard we have a hadith which says:

خُذِ الْحِكْمَةَ وَ لَوْ مِنْ أَهْلِ النِّفَاقِ

Go and seek wisdom, even if it should be from hypocrites.[4]

In Islam, hypocrisy is strongly condemned; in the Qur'an, hypocrites are described as being in the lowest level of hell.[5] However, if we are in need of a piece of wisdom and for some reason it is available with people who are hypocrites, then we should not hesitate to go and learn it from them, bearing in mind that, as we mentioned previously, this has some conditions.

Therefore, as the hadiths clearly state, there is no limit to seeking knowledge; we are commanded to go and seek it regardless of our age, how far away the source of knowledge is, and the kind of person who has knowledge. We should use all available means which can help us acquire knowledge in a moral and legitimate way because to know more results

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[4] *Nahj al-Balāghah (Subhi Sālih),* p.481, wise saying no. 79

[5] The Qur'an (4:145). The Arabic text is as follows:

إِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ فِي الدَّرْكِ الْأَسْفَلِ مِنَ النَّارِ

in having a better chance of gaining both personal perfection and community improvement.

There is another hadith which says:

> مَنْ خَرَجَ مِنْ بَيْتِهِ لِيَلْتَمِسَ بَاباً مِنَ الْعِلْمِ كَتَبَ اللهُ عَزَّ وَ جَلَّ لَهُ بِكُلِّ قَدَمٍ ثَوَابَ نَبِيٍّ مِنَ الأَنْبِيَاءِ
>
> If someone leaves their house with the intention of gaining some kind of knowledge, for every step that they take God shall bestow upon them the reward reserved for a prophet.[6]

This demonstrates how much attention and merit Islam gives to knowledge and its seeker.

The description of the merits of the seeker of knowledge goes even further in a hadith which says:

> إِنَّ الْمَلاَئِكَةَ لَتَضَعُ أَجْنِحَتَهَا لِطَالِبِ الْعِلْمِ
>
> Indeed, the angels spread their wings under the feet of the seekers of knowledge.[7]

Of course, angels do not possess physical bodies and so what is meant here is that they would be at the service of seekers of knowledge. Angels would be so humble in front

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[6] *Jāmi' al-Akhbār*, p. 38
[7] *al-Kāfi*, vol. 1, p. 34

of seekers of knowledge that it would be as if they are putting their wings under those people's feet.

The same respect is given to the seeker of knowledge by great Islamic scholars. Regarding this, we can refer to the story of Grand Ayatullāh Mar'ashī Najafī. Ayatullāh Mar'ashī established a great library in Qum. His story is very interesting. He started collecting money by fasting and praying on behalf of others or working for them. With the money he earned, he would buy important manuscripts in Najaf, one by one. Eventually, he had collected so many books, all kept in a great library which exists until today. When he made his will, he asked to be buried on the ground floor of his library in order to be under the feet of those who go to study and learn.

Let us finish this lesson by mentioning and explaining a beautiful hadith. The hadith declares:

مَنْ تَعَلَّمَ الْعِلْمَ وَ عَمِلَ بِهِ وَ عَلَّمَ لِلَّهِ دُعِيَ فِي مَلَكُوتِ السَّمَاوَاتِ عَظِيماً

> Whoever learns, teaches, and acts for the sake of God would be mentioned with respect and considered to be a great personality in the kingdom of God in the heavens.[8]

[8] *al-Kāfi*, vol. 1, p. 35

There is a point to be made here which helps us to understand the importance of this hadith. It is not very difficult to be considered as someone important in dunya because here on Earth, people easily say that some one is great. However, to be considered as a great personality in the kingdom of God is a truly excellent achievement. The hadith says that the seeker of knowledge who acts upon the knowledge acquired will achieve this position.

Having studied the Qur'an and the hadiths, there remains no doubt that the seeker of knowledge has a great status in Islam and in front of God. Seeking knowledge is said to be an obligation for all people, no matter how old they are and even if it means that they should travel far to gain it.

However, there remains a point which needs careful consideration. Some people deprive themselves of all the merits of knowledge because they fear the responsibilities that a knowledgeable person has. They believe correctly that if a person has knowledge and does not act upon it, they will be held responsible. So in an effort to avoid this, they deprive themselves of knowledge altogether. There are two points which they should take into consideration. The first is that what they fear only happens if a person does not act according to their knowledge. Therefore, why not try to act according to one's knowledge and then be considered a great personality in the kingdom of God? Secondly, although God expects more from knowledgeable people, a person who was

able to learn yet refused to do so will be treated just the same as one who has gained knowledge; therefore, the same expectations exist.

There is a hadith that on the Day of Judgment some people will be asked about why they did not act. When they reply that they did not have knowledge, they will be asked why they did not learn.[9] If we are able to learn and we do not do so, our excuse is not accepted. Therefore, we should always try to increase our knowledge and at the same time be determined to act upon it. Through it, we can achieve and enjoy the great merits made available to the seeker of knowledge.[10]

## Summary

1. In Islamic culture, those who are pious are considered to be better than those who do not have piety at all or have it

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[9] *Amālī (Tūsī),* p. 9. The original text is as follows:

عَنْ مَسْعَدَةَ بْنِ زِيَادٍ، قَالَ: سَمِعْتُ جَعْفَرَ بْنَ مُحَمَّدٍ (ع) وَ قَدْ سُئِلَ عَنْ قَوْلِهِ (تَعَالَى) "فَلِلَّهِ الْحُجَّةُ الْبالِغَةُ" فَقَالَ: إِنَّ اللهَ تَعَالَى يَقُولُ لِلْعَبْدِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ: عَبْدِي أَكُنْتَ عَالِماً؟ فَإِنْ قَالَ: نَعَمْ، قَالَ لَهُ: أَفَلا عَمِلْتَ بِمَا عَلِمْتَ؟ وَ إِنْ قَالَ: كُنْتُ جَاهِلا، قَالَ لَهُ: أَفَلا تَعَلَّمْتَ حَتَّى تَعْمَلَ؟ فَيَخْصِمُهُ، فَتِلْكَ الْحُجَّةُ الْبَالِغَةُ.

[10] If you are interested to know more about the significance of knowledge and its value, please refer to a paper by Ayatollah Mutahhari. This paper has been translated into English and published in the journal *Message of Thaqalayn.* You can find a free online copy of the paper at: http://messageofthaqalayn.com/43-Duty.pdf

to a lesser degree. Unlike race, colour, or ethnicity, piety is considered to be a benchmark.

2. It is understood from the Qur'an that having knowledge is also considered to be something which can mean that one person is considered as better than another.

3. In Islamic culture, correct knowledge is the knowledge which helps us to have a better understanding of God, His creation, ourselves, and what we are supposed to do.

4. Prophet Muhammad (s) says that not only is it not bad and indeed better to seek and gain knowledge, but even more than this, it is actually compulsory for every Muslim man and woman to do so.

5. In Islam, there is no limit to acquiring knowledge as far as age and distance are concerned. The Prophet (s) advised us to seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave. He also advised us to seek knowledge even if we have to travel as far as China to find it.

6. In Islam, hypocrisy is strongly condemned, and hypocrites are described as being in the lowest level of hell. However, if we are in need of a piece of wisdom and for some reason it is available with people who are hypocrites, then we should not hesitate to go and learn it from them.

7. If someone leaves their house with the intention of gaining knowledge, for every step that they take God shall bestow upon them the reward reserved for prophets. This demonstrates how much attention and merit Islam gives to knowledge and its seeker.

8. Whoever learns, teaches, and acts for the sake of God would be mentioned with respect and considered as a great personality in the kingdom of God in the heavens.

9. If someone is able to acquire knowledge and yet refuses to do so because he fears the consequences of not acting accordingly, his excuse will not be accepted.

## Lesson Nineteen:

## Contemplation, Focusing on Our Own Problems and Avoiding Jealousy

### Introduction

In this lesson, we will study the virtues of reflection and contemplation. For many people, learning is simply a matter of reading and memorizing facts. However, in Islam, it is very important for knowledge to be accompanied by reasoning and understanding. It is not enough to merely accumulate information and data. In Islamic culture, it is said that contemplation is the best type of worship.

We will then address another virtue which is very crucial for those who want to pursue a spiritual journey: to focus on our own problems instead of being overly concerned about other people's issues. We will study hadiths from the Imams (a) on this subject

Finally, we will learn about avoiding jealousy. We will explain the consequences of jealousy and introduce a moral alternative to it.

**Contemplation**

In the Qur'an, God advises people to use their intellect 47 times. He says that we should think 18 times, and He encourages us to reflect four times. For example, in chapter 3, He says:

إِنَّ فی خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَ الأَرْضِ وَ اخْتِلافِ اللَّیْلِ وَ النَّهارِ لَآیاتٍ لِأُولی الأَلْبَاب اَلَّذِینَ یَذْکُرُونَ اللهَ قِیَامًا وَ قُعُودًا وَ عَلی جُنُوبِهِمْ وَ یَتَفَکَّرُونَ فی خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَ الأَرْضِ رَبَّنَا مَا خَلَقْتَ هَذَا بَاطِلا سُبْحَانَکَ فَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّار

*Indeed in the creation of the heavens and the earth and in the alternation of night and day, there are signs for those who possess intellect. Those who remember Allah standing, sitting, and lying on their sides and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth [and say], "Our Lord, You have not created this in vain! Immaculate are You! Save us from the punishment of the Fire."* (3:190-191)

This shows the importance of thinking about creations and thinking about ourselves, our relationship with God, our moral condition, and our positive and negative points.

There is a hadith from Imam al-Kazim (a), which is a few pages long, in which he addresses Hishām Ibn al-Hakam. This hadith is very beautiful and profound, and actually needs a separate discussion to do it justice. The Imam (a)

starts the hadith by referring to the verses of Qur'an which are about intellect. Then he (a) says:

يَا هِشَامُ مَا قُسِمَ بَيْنَ الْعِبَادِ أَفْضَلُ مِنَ الْعَقْلِ، نَوْمُ الْعَاقِلِ أَفْضَلُ مِنْ سَهَرِ الْجَاهِلِ

O Hisham! Nothing more precious than reason has been given to people. The slumber of a man of reason is better than the worship of an ignorant person throughout the night.[1]

If a person who has no understanding worships all night, this worship is not as valuable as the sleep of one who has understanding. Of course, if a person of understanding – as a believer who reflects and comprehends – also worships, then that would be even more valuable. For example, we have a hadith which says that to reflect for an hour is better than worshipping for one year[2]. In other hadiths sixty[3] and seventy[4] years are also mentioned. This depends on the quality of the reflection.

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[1] *Tuhaf al-'Uqūl*, p. 397.

[2] *Tafsīr al-'Ayyāshī,* vol. 2, p. 208

عن أبي عبد الله (ع) قال: تفكر ساعة خير من عبادة سنة

[3] *Mir'at al-'Uqūl fī Sharh Akhbar Āl al-Rasoul,* vol. 9, p. 257. The original text is as follows:

تفكر ساعة خير من عبادة ستين سنة

[4] *Rīyāḍ al-Sālikīn,* vol. 3, p. 370. The original text is as follows:

تفكر ساعة خير من عبادة سبعين سنة

Thus, reflecting on important issues is described as being more valuable than worshipping a great deal but without understanding. For example, there are people who worship for 60 years but because they do so without understanding and without knowing the true requirements of their worship, they are not elevated by it as much as they could be, nor as much as is the one who has simply been reflecting.

Regarding this, there is a beautiful hadith about one of the great personalities in Islam, Abū Dhar:

> كَانَ أَكْثَرَ عِبَادَةِ أَبِي ذَرٍّ رَحِمَهُ اللهُ التَّفَكُّرُ وَ الاعْتِبَار
>
> Most of Abū Dhar's worship was contemplation and consideration.[5]

Of course, this does not mean that we should become idle, refrain from doing anything, and pretend to be thinking. First of all, we have to perform our obligatory actions and then, whenever we get a chance, we should occupy ourselves with contemplation. We can reflect when we are reading the Qur'an, studying, talking, listening to people, or even when we are walking. This reflection should be planned and organised, and we should make note of our thoughts and discuss our ideas with other people. If a person thinks and contemplates in such an active way, then not only will they

[5] *Wasaii'l al-Shi'ah,* vol. 15, p. 197

not become idle but since they have understood the value of worship, they will benefit more from it and in a wiser way.

There is a hadith from Imam al-'Askarī (a) which says:

لَيْسَتِ الْعِبَادَةُ كَثْرَةَ الصِّيَامِ وَ الصَّلاةِ وَ إِنَّمَا الْعِبَادَةُ كَثْرَةُ التَّفَكُّرِ فِى أَمْرِ اللهِ

> Worship is not a matter of continuous prayer and fasting; rather, worship is nothing but reflecting often over divine matters.[6]

We should not imagine that if we continuously say prayers or fast every day, we will necessarily be considered a good servant of God. On the contrary, the Imam (a) teaches us that these are not enough. Real worship or servitude towards God is to engage oneself in reflection over divine matters. We should reflect and ponder. In the Qur'an we are advised numerous times by God to ponder, especially about the Qur'an itself:

أَفَلا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ أَمْ عَلى قُلُوبٍ أَقْفالُها

> *Don't they ponder on Qur'an or are their hearts sealed?* (47:24)

Sometimes people are merely concerned with reciting the entire Qur'an again and again. As important and valuable as

[6] *Bihār al-Anwār,* vol. 68, p. 325

this is, if we are to choose between reciting the entire Qur'an without reflection and reciting less of it but with more contemplation, the latter is a wiser choice. The Qur'an is a book for life, for understanding, and for reflection – not merely a book from which we only try to gain reward. If there is so much emphasis on reading and reciting the Qur'an, it is because this is an initial step towards understanding the Qur'an.[7]

## Focusing on Oneself

Another virtue which we should try to achieve is being focused on our own moral problems. Sometimes people who are commencing their spiritual journey become very conscious of and concerned about other people's problems. For example, if they hear about the significance of reflecting, they start blaming others for not being thoughtful. Or when they hear that one should not pursue worldly pleasures as an ultimate goal, they become judgmental about others and say that they are not observing this point. However, the truth is that the more we learn about morality, the more we should become concerned with ourselves and our own situation. Indeed, we should be so greatly concerned with improving

[7] To read more about thinking and contemplation from the Islamic perspective, please refer to the paper *Contemplation in Islam* by Mahnaz Heidarpour, published in the first volume of *A Catholic-Shi'a Dialogue*.

ourselves that we do not have time to look for problems in other people.

Of course, this does not mean that we do not have a responsibility towards other people. This is another matter. For example, if we come to know that someone has a habit of doing something wrong, we have a responsibility to try to help them. However, one should never be nosy and investigate other people's lives.

In any case, a believer has to be more concerned with correcting his own faults and disciplining himself. Imam Ali (a) says:

مَنْ نَظَرَ فِی عَیْبِ نَفْسِهِ اشْتَغَلَ عَنْ عَیْبِ غَیْرِهِ

> The person who sees their own defects stays away from looking into other people's shortcomings.[8]

In another hadith he (a) says:

طُوبَی لِمَنْ شَغَلَهُ عَیْبُهُ عَنْ عُیُوبِ النَّاسِ

> Well done to those whose own defects have made them so busy that they don't have time to think about other people's defects.[9]

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[8] *Nahj al-Balāghah (Subhi Sālih),* p. 536, wise-saying 349
[9] *Nahj al-Balāghah (Subhi Sālih),* p. 255

Therefore, we should try to be more suspicious about own selves rather than being suspicious about other people.

**Liberation from Jealousy**

Refraining from jealousy is another virtue which we need to acquire. Jealousy is very destructive. It damages us from within and without, and it deprives us from feeling comfortable. A jealous person will never have a peaceful life. They will be annoyed whenever other people are respected, have children, have money, or have more knowledge. They feel sad and negative all the time. Even more, when a person is jealous, this feeling of jealousy usually makes them carry out bad actions and so they may start saying bad things about the person of whom they are jealous, or they will try to damage their reputation or their relationships with their family members and friends.

Furthermore, when a person is jealous they are actually questioning God's wisdom.

In the Qur'an God says:

أَمْ يَحْسُدُونَ النَّاسَ عَلى ما آتاهُم اللهُ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ

*Or do they envy people for what God has given them of his grace?* (4:54)

Moreover, when a jealous person damages someone's reputation out of jealousy, God becomes very displeased

because He is deeply concerned about people's good reputation.

For example, imagine there is an active member of society – like a politician, a scholar, a doctor, or a teacher – who, after many years of hard and dedicated work, is now trusted and respected by people. This makes it easy for him to work in the community. A person such as a scholar who is not respected and loved by people cannot help them in religious matters. Therefore, if a person feels jealous of that scholar and starts spreading rumours about them, they are not only damaging the reputation and life of that scholar, but also taking lots of opportunities away from both the scholar and the people who are supported by the scholar. Thus, the jealous person gains nothing and others also gain nothing from this jealousy; instead, they are indeed harmed by it.

A hadith states:

الْحَسَدَ يَأْكُلُ الْحَسَنَاتِ كَمَا تَأْكُلُ النَّارُ الْحَطَبَ

Jealousy consumes all good deeds in the same way that fire consumes logs and wood.[10]

Nothing remains with jealousy; all good actions are burnt. In some books on morality, it is said that sometimes people are even ready to harm themselves in order to harm the person of whom they are jealous. There is a very sad story about a

[10] *al-Kāfī* vol. 8, p. 45

person who was extremely jealous of his neighbour. Consumed by his jealousy, he ordered his own servant to kill him and put his head on the roof of the neighbour's house so that when people find his head, they would think that the neighbour had killed him and would in turn have him killed in retribution. The servant initially refused to carry it out, but the jealous person insisted. Under pressure, the servant finally accepted to do as he was ordered. When the head was found, the neighbour was arrested but he was not found guilty by the court and was later released. Thus, the jealous person wasted his life trying to harm his neighbour and yet did not benefit from his actions nor achieve anything. Indeed, he had lost everything in both this world and the hereafter.[11]

Therefore, we should strive to avoid being jealous. It is good for our psychological health, our tranquility and serenity, and our social relationships. But most importantly, it makes God pleased with us. We should be happy with God's decisions about other people. Of course, we are told in hadiths that instead of being jealous, a believer may envy in a positive way. This is called *qibtah*. *Qibtah* is different from *hasad* which is jealousy. *Hasad* is to be upset that others have a good quality or possess something good, and to want them to lose it. On the other hand, *qibtah* is to want the same good quality or benefit without wanting the other person to lose theirs.

[11] *Jihād bā Nafs*, vol. 2, Mawāne'-e Seir ila Allah (hasad)

Not only is *qibtah* not disliked, but indeed it is encouraged. For example, if a friend of ours has good children or a good position in society and we are sincerely happy for them – wishing and praying that God preserves these blessings for them and indeed increases them – then it is definitely not a bad thing if at the same time we pray to have similar blessings.

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**Summary**

1. Contemplation is a great virtue according to Islam. It is the best type of worship. Worship does not simply mean to occupy oneself with prayer and fasting. It also means that one must reflects over divine matters.

2. According to Islam, thinking for an hour is better than worshipping for one whole year. Of course, if a person of understanding – as a believer who reflects and comprehends – also worships, then this would be even more valuable.

3. The more we learn about morality, the more we should be focused on our own moral problems. We should be concerned with correcting and disciplining ourselves, rather than concerning ourselves about other people's problems.

4. Refraining from jealousy is another task which we need to accomplish. A jealous person will never have a peaceful life. Jealous people feel sad and negative all the time.

Furthermore, when a person is jealous, this jealousy usually makes them carry out bad actions.

5. When a person is jealous, they are actually questioning God's wisdom. Furthermore, when a jealous person damages someone's reputation due to their jealousy, God becomes very displeased because He is deeply concerned about people's good reputation.

6. Jealousy or *hasad* means to be upset that others have a good quality or benefit, whereas *qibtah* is to want to have a similar good quality or benefit without wanting the other person to lose theirs.

## Lesson Twenty:

## Fulfilling Promises, Trustworthiness, Forgiving and Serving Others

### Introduction

We explained that moral virtues can be divided into four groups. We have already studied the first and second categories regarding those virtues which relate to our relationship with God and those related to our relationship with ourselves. In this lesson, we will start studying the third group which comprises of virtues related to our relationships with other people. This will be followed by a study of the last group which is concerned with our relationships with the rest of the world, including all beings other than human beings and God.

In this very significant lesson, we will need to study the many important virtues associated with our social relationships with other people because these form the foundations of any sustainable society. First, we will address the fact that it is impossible to have a peaceful and sustainable society if people do not fulfill their promises. Second, we will briefly refer to the subject of the return of

trusts to their owners, which is closely related to fulfilling promises. Third, we will address two further social virtues: forgiving those who have wronged us and serving people.

We will study verses of the Qur'an and hadiths concerning these virtues, and attempt to discover the position of these virtues in Islamic culture.

**Fulfilling Promises**

An atmosphere of contentment cannot be established in a society where people do not keep their promises. This leads to a loss in trust. When people in such a society believe that their family members, friends, neighbours, or colleagues are not going to keep their promises, life becomes incredibly miserable for everyone involved. In such a society, nothing can be planned properly and no significant progress can be made. In the Qur'an God says:

وَ أَوْفُواْ بِالْعَهْدِ إِنَّ الْعَهْدَ كَانَ مَسْئولا

*And fulfill the promise. Surely (every) promise shall be questioned about.* (17:34)

We will be questioned about our promises. We should not simply disregard our promises for our own convenience. We have to keep and fulfill them. Furthermore, in verse 32 of chapter 70, when enumerating the characteristics of good people, God says:

وَ الَّذِينَ هُمْ لأَمَانَاتِهِمْ وَ عَهْدِهِمْ رَاعُونَ

*And those who are faithful to their trust and their covenant* (70:32)

God praises people who not only keep their promise to God and observe the covenant which they have made with Him, but they also fulfill any kind of promise and covenant that they have made with people. Therefore, according to Islam, one of the most important characteristics of a believer is to be able to keep promises.

In the hadiths we are even instructed to keep promises made to children. Some people think that they only need to keep promises made to adults and they do not take promises made to children seriously. However, the hadith says:

أَحِبُّوا الصِّبْيَانَ وَ ارْحَمُوهُمْ وَ إِذَا وَعَدْتُمُوهُمْ شَيْئاً فَفُوا لَهُمْ فَإِنَّهُمْ لايَدْرُونَ إِلا أَنَّكُمْ تَرْزُقُونَهُم

Love children and show mercy to them. And when you promise them, keep your promise, for they do not know other than you as their providers.[1]

We should either not make a promise to our children in the first place, or fulfill our promises when we make them. If we cannot do something, then it is much better not to make a

[1] *al-Kāfī,* vol. 6, p. 49

false promise which we do not intend to keep or are unable to keep. The hadith states that children consider adults to be their sustainers. Therefore, it is very important that we show them love and trust. Imagine how miserable life would become if we, as adults, thought that God who is our Lord did not care about keeping His promises. If parents do not demonstrate reliability and love, their children will suffer tremendously. Therefore, we should keep our promises to everyone, including children, and indeed even to our enemies.

### Returning Trusts to their Owners

Something which is closely related to fulfilling that which we have promised is to return trusts. When people entrust us with something then we must return it to them.

Verse 58 of chapter 4 of the Qur'an reads:

إِنَّ اللهَ يَأْمُرُكُمْ أَن تُؤَدُّواْ الأَمَانَاتِ إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهَا

*Indeed God commands you to deliver the trusts to their owners.* (4:58)

In addition, verse 283 of chapter 2 says:

فَإِنْ أَمِنَ بَعْضُكُمْ بَعْضا فَلْيُؤَدِّ الَّذِي اؤْتُمِنَ أَمَانَتَهُ

*And if one of you entrusts (something) to another, let him who is trusted deliver his trust.* (2:283)

Furthermore, it is written in our hadiths that even if a very wicked person such as the killer of Imam Husayn (a) entrusts us with something, we should still give it back to them.[2]

As we have said before, everyone called Prophet Muhammad (s) *al-amin*, the trusted one. He was so greatly trusted that even people who did not believe in him and in the message he brought still kept their valuables with him. When the Prophet (s) wanted to emigrate to Madinah, he asked Imam Ali (a) to return all of the people's valuables that they had entrusted to him.

### Forgiving People

We should observe forgiveness with respect to other people because according to Islam, to forgive people is a virtue. In the Qur'an, when describing the pious people for whom paradise has been prepared, God says:

> وَ الْكَاظِمِينَ الْغَيْظَ وَ الْعَافِينَ عَنِ النَّاسِ وَ اللهُ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِين
>
> *....and (those who) suppress their anger and excuse [the faults of] the people, and Allah loves the virtuous.* (3:134)

[2] *Amālī (Sadūq),* p. 245. The original text is as follows:
أَدُّوا الأَمَانَةَ وَ لَوْ إِلَى قَاتِلِ الْحُسَيْنِ بْنِ عَلِيٍّ

In verse 22 of chapter 24, God tells us to forgive even those who have wronged us:

وَ لْيَعْفُوا وَ لْيَصْفَحُوا أَلا تُحِبُّونَ أَنْ يَغْفِرَ اللهُ لَكُمْ وَ اللهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

*Let them pardon and overlook. Do you not love that Allah should forgive you? And Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.* (24:22)

In the same way that we expect God to forgive us, we should also forgive those who have wronged us. First of all, in many cases we are not really able to ascertain whether we are guilty or the other person is guilty. This is because sometimes we are not aware of the intention of the other person, or we might not remember exactly what has happened. Sometimes due to our love for ourselves, we forget that we were actually the one who created the problem in the first place. When selfishness and ego exist in us, it is very difficult to admit that we are responsible for a problem, so we consider the other person to be responsible and we refuse to forgive them. Islamic teachings explain that no matter who is responsible for a problem, there should be no enmity, hostility, or hatred between people; we should forgive one another. Even when the other person is actually in the wrong, we should still try to forgive them and create peace between the two of us. Thus, the main principle is to

forgive people and pardon the wrong that was carried out against us.

Of course, there are some exceptions to this general rule. For example, if we know that a person will repeat his mistake after having been forgiven, we should use a different method. We should not forgive or pardon the wrong done to us by someone if they will then go on to do something similar to someone else. For example, if the rights of a nation or a group of people are infringed, we should not forgive this action. However, if the wrong that has been done is a personal matter, or if it is now over and done with, then we should forgive. For example, issues of conflict between couples or siblings are not usually systematic violations of another person's rights. These are normally the kind of things which people often do, without even noticing what they have done. Thus, the main principle is to forgive and pardon unless doing so would create worse consequences in the future.

There is a hadith from the Prophet (s) in which he says:

أَلا أَدُلُّكُمْ عَلَى خَيْرِ أَخْلاقِ الدُّنْيَا وَ الآخِرَةِ؟ تَصِلُ مَنْ قَطَعَكَ وَ تُعْطِي مَنْ حَرَمَكَ وَ تَعْفُو عَمَّنْ ظَلَمَكَ.

Shall I lead you to the best forms of morality for this world and the life to come? (These forms of morality are) to regard the one who has disregarded you, to give to the one who

has deprived you, and to pardon the one who has wronged you.[3]

In the previous lessons we mentioned that the Prophet (s) said that he was appointed as a prophet to accomplish noble traits of character.[4] These are some of those noble traits of character which involve much more than just reciprocating a good action. If someone has been kind to us and we are then kind to them, we have merely reciprocated their kindness. But if we are kind to someone who has not been kind to us, if we give to someone who deprived us when we were in need, or if we visit someone who did not visit us when we were ill, then we have indeed acquired noble traits of character. Imam Ali (a) said:

إِذَا قَدَرْتَ عَلَى عَدُوِّكَ فَاجْعَلِ الْعَفْوَ عَنْهُ شُكْراً لِلْقُدْرَةِ عَلَيْهِ

When you gain power over your adversary, pardon them by way of thanks for being able to overpower them.[5]

To demonstrate that we are thankful to God, when we have more power than our adversary, we should forgive them! Of course, if that person insists on doing wrong, or if there is a systematic violation of another person's rights, then the

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[3] *al-Kāfi,* vol. 2,p. 107

[4] *Makārim al-Akhlāq,* p. 8. The original text is as follows:

إِنَّمَا بُعِثْتُ لأُتَمِّمَ مَكَارِمَ الأَخْلاق

[5] *Nahj al-Balāghah (Subhi Sālih),* p. 470, wise-saying 11

proper action is to speak to that person and ask them to cease their wrong actions.

It is also recommended to forgive someone who owes us money and they are unable to repay it. In this case, to forgive is to cancelling all debts owed.

**Serving Others**

According to Islam, it is very important to serve people and to be a channel of God's mercy to others. This does not only apply to family members or close friends, but to everyone and everything so that even animals and plants benefit from our presence. Serving people is hugely important and in Islam, this is extended to even include other creatures of God.

In the Qur'an, when talking about Prophet Jesus (a), one of the things which God mentions is that Jesus (a) said:

وَ جَعَلَنی مُبَارَکا أَیْنَ مَا کُنتُ

*And He [God] has made me blessed wherever I may be.* (19:31)

The Prophet (s) explains that what Prophet Jesus (a) meant in this verse is that God made him very useful and beneficial to people.[6] Furthermore, there is another hadith from

[6] *al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'an,* vol. 14, p. 53

Prophet Muhammad (s) in which he says: "To believe in God and to benefit His servants are the two highest characteristics."[7] If someone believes in God and helps people, they should be very pleased that God has blessed them with these two great qualities.

In another hadith we read that God loves most those servants who benefit other servants the most.[8] For example, if we have children and one of them very much loves our other children and helps them, then naturally, this child will receive greater respect from us. We want the very best for all of our children. So if one of them helps the others, we feel that they are in fact helping us and so somehow we have to thank them. This helps us understand why God says that He loves most those who love others the most. There is another hadith which says:

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قال النبی قول عیسی (ع): «وَ جَعَلَنِی مُبارَکاً أَیْنَ ما کُنْتُ» قال (ص): جعلنی نفاعا للناس أین اتجهت.

[7] *Tuhaf al-'Uqūl,* p. 35. The original text is as follows:
قَالَ (ص): خَصْلَتَانِ لَیْسَ فَوْقَهُمَا مِنَ الْبِرِّ شَیْءٌ: الإِیمَانُ بِاللَّهِ وَ النَّفْعُ لِعِبَادِ اللَّه

[8] *al-Kāfī,* vol. 2, p. 164. The original text is as follows:
أَبَا عَبْدِ اللَّهِ (ع) یَقُولُ: سُئِلَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ (ص): مَنْ أَحَبُّ النَّاسِ إِلَى اللَّهِ قَالَ (ص): أَنْفَعُ النَّاسِ لِلنَّاسِ.

قَالَ (ص): إِنَّ لِلَّهِ عِبَاداً يَفْزَعُ إِلَيْهِمُ النَّاسُ فِي حَوَائِجِهِمْ أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الآمِنُونَ مِنْ عَذَابِ اللَّهِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ.

There are some servants of God to whom people resort when in need. They will be safe from punishment on the Day of Resurrection.[9]

Sometimes people approach a particular person for help because that person has experience, knowledge, money, or friends. Such a person should not think that helping these people is a waste of time or energy. It is indeed an honour and blessing when it is through us that God helps people. In this way we also receive immense benefits. Therefore, when someone comes to us for help we should appreciate this great opportunity.

There are plenty of hadiths about the reward that God gives to people who help others and fulfill their needs. This reward is even greater than the reward given for performing Hajj, which is an obligation under certain conditions.[10] Therefore, it is very important that we help one another as much as we can and this would then make God very pleased with us.

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[9] *Tuhaf al-'Uqūl*, p. 52

[10] *Amālī (Sadūq)*, p. 237. The original text is as follows:
قَضَاءُ حَاجَةِ الْمُؤْمِنِ أَفْضَلُ مِنْ أَلْفِ حِجَّةٍ مُتَقَبَّلَةٍ بِمَنَاسِكِهَا

Summary

1. One of the major characteristics of a believer is to keep promises. God praises people who not only keep their promise to God, but who also observe any sort of promise which they have made with anyone else.

2. We should always keep our promises, even when we have made promises to children, to enemies, or to people who we do not consider to be good.

3. Something which is closely related to fulfilling that which is promised is to return a trust to its owner. When people entrust us with something, we must return it.

4. According to Islam, to forgive people is a virtue. The main principle is to forgive people and pardon wrongs done to us, unless doing so would create worse consequences in the future.

5. According to Islam, it is of utmost importance to serve people and to be a channel of God's mercy to others. This does not only apply to family members or close friends, but also to everyone and everything – meaning even animals and plants should benefit from our presence.

# Lesson Twenty-One:

# Family and Hospitality

## Introduction

We have studied the first aspect of virtues related to our relationships with other people and we mentioned some of the things which are related to all groups of people, such as keeping our promises, safeguarding and returning trusts, forgiving people, and being helpful and beneficial to others.

Now we want to address some of those virtues which relate to specific groups of people. For example, one of the things found in Islamic morality is safeguarding our families. This is not a responsibility for everyone or towards everyone; rather, it is an additional responsibility for those who are part of a family.

Another group towards whom we have extra responsibility is our guests, and this is what is known as hospitality.

In this lesson, we will study these two virtues using the Qur'an and hadiths.

## Safeguarding the Family

In Islamic teachings we find great emphasis placed on marriage and indeed it has been considered as the most beloved of constructions.

مَا بُنِيَ بِنَاءٌ فِي الإِسْلامِ أَحَبُّ إِلى اللهِ مِنَ التَّزْوِيج

Withing Islam, there is no construction more beloved to Allah than marriage.[1]

Marriage is considered to be a sacred covenant between two people, while divorce is regarded as the most disliked permissible act according to hadith.[2] That said, according to Islam divorce is still possible because it is sometimes a social need. Therefore, anything that helps a family stay together and remain united is very valuable and important, and anything that separates families or brings forth division is very bad and disliked.

Regarding the philosophy of marriage, the Qur'an says:

وَ مِنْ آياتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْواجاً لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْها وَ جَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَ رَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذلِكَ لآياتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُون

*Among His signs is that He has created mates for you from amongst yourselves so that you find peace and*

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[1] *Makārim al-Akhlāq*, p.196

[2] *Nahj al-Fasāhah*, p. 157. The Arabic text is as follows:
أبغض الحلال إلى الله الطّلاق

*tranquility with them and He has established love and mercy between you.* (30:21)

This relationship and bond is planned by God and should be appreciated. The Qur'an also urges members of the family to have love and mercy for one another. For example, when it comes to men, God asks them to be kind to their wives and to interact with them in an honourable manner.[3]

Unity of the family is very important, even for a couple that does not have children. However, for a family with children it becomes much more important and everyone is then even more responsible for safeguarding the family unit. There are numerous guidelines in Islamic culture about the love and care that parents should render to their children, and how they should try to cater to their needs. These needs are not merely physical; they also include psychological and spiritual needs. Parents are responsible for giving their children an Islamic and moral upbringing, and for nurturing them in order for them to become good and successful people, as well as active members of society.

On the other hand, children should also respect their parents and obey them as much as possible. According to Islam, no matter how old we are or what status we have in society, we must obey our parents. The only situation in which God tells

[3] The Qur'an 4:19. The original text is as follows:
وَ عاشِروهُنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوف

us not to obey our parents is when they ask us to commit a sin. For example, if our parents ask us not to say our prayers or not to fast obligatory fasts, or if they ask us to annoy and hurt our spouse, children, or neighbour, we should not obey them because in these instances, obeying them means to disobey God.

A hadith says:

لاطَاعَةَ لِمَخْلُوقٍ فِی مَعْصِيَةِ الْخَالِقِ

There is no way to obey a creature of God by disobeying God.[4]

Therefore, unless our parents pressure us to do something wrong, God says that we should obey them. But even in a situation where they try to make us do something wrong and we have to resist, we should still be kind and benevolent towards them.

وَ إِن جَاهَدَاکَ عَلیٰ أَن تُشْرِکَ بِی مَا لَيْسَ لَکَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ فَلَاتُطِعْهُمَا وَ صَاحِبْهُمَا فِی الدُّنْيَا مَعْرُوفًا

*But if they urge you to ascribe to Me as partner that of which you have no knowledge, then do not obey them. Keep their company honourably in this world* (31:15)

[4] *Kitāb Salīm b. Qays Hilālī,* vol. 2, p. 884, h. 45

There are even instances in the Qur'an where God mentions parents alongside mentioning Himself:

وَقَضى رَبُّكَ أَلاَّ تَعْبُدُوا إِلاَّ إِيَّاهُ وَ بِالْوالِدَيْنِ إِحْسانا

*Your Lord has decreed that you shall not worship anyone except Him, and [He has enjoined] kindness to parents.* (17:23)

Parents have such a high position in the sight of God that He commands us to be kind to them immediately after commanding us to worship Him.

The rest of the verse also contains advice on how to treat our parents:

إِمَّا يَبْلُغَنَّ عِندَكَ الكِبَرَ أَحَدُهُمَا أَوْ كِلاهُمَا فَلاتَقُل لَّهُما أُفٍ وَ لاتَنْهَرْهُما وَ قُل لَّهُمَا قَوْلا كَرِيمًا

*Should they reach old age at your side—one of them or both—do not say to them, "Fie!" And do not chide them, but speak to them noble words.* (17:23)

Both parents have great rights upon us, but our mothers have an even greater right over us. When Prophet Jesus (a) was born, he (a) said that God asked him to be kind to his mother:

و بَرًّا بِوالِدَتي وَ لَمْ يَجْعَلْنِي جَبَّارًا شَقِيًّا

*.....and to be good to my mother, and He has not made me self-willed and wretched.* (19:32)

Regarding the high status of mothers, Prophet Muhammad (s) said:

الْجَنَّةُ تَحْتَ أَقْدَامِ الأُمَّهَاتِ

Heaven is under the feet of mothers.[5]

On one occasion, the Prophet (s) told a person to be kind to his mother, repeating this three times before telling him to be kind to his father.[6] On another occasion, someone told the Prophet (s) that he had buried his daughter alive. The Prophet (s) asked that man if his mother was alive and he said that his mother had passed away. Then the Prophet (s) told him to be kind to the sister of his mother, saying that this would compensate for the sin of killing his daughter.[7]

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[5] *Nahj al-Fasāhah*, p. 434

[6] *al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, p. 159. The original text is as follows:
عَنْ أَبِي عَبْدِ اللهِ (ع) قَالَ: جَاءَ رَجُلٌ إِلَى النَّبِيِّ (ص) فَقَالَ: يَا رَسُولَ اللهِ مَنْ أَبَرُّ؟ قَالَ: أُمَّكَ قَالَ: ثُمَّ مَنْ؟ قَالَ: أُمَّكَ قَالَ: ثُمَّ مَنْ؟ قَالَ: أُمَّكَ قَالَ: ثُمَّ مَنْ؟ قَالَ: أَبَاكَ.

[7] *al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, p. 162. The original text is as follows:
جَاءَ رَجُلٌ إِلَى النَّبِيِّ (ص) فَقَالَ: إِنِّي قَدْ وَلَدْتُ بِنْتاً وَ رَبَّيْتُهَا حَتَّى إِذَا بَلَغَتْ فَأَلْبَسْتُهَا وَ حَلَّيْتُهَا ثُمَّ جِئْتُ بِهَا إِلَى قَلِيبٍ فَدَفَعْتُهَا فِي جَوْفِهِ وَ كَانَ آخِرُ مَا سَمِعْتُ مِنْهَا وَ هِيَ تَقُولُ: يَا أَبَتَاهُ فَمَا كَفَّارَةُ ذَلِكَ؟ قَالَ: أَلَكَ أُمٌّ حَيَّةٌ؟ قَالَ: لا

The above examples are just a few instances of many in which people have been told to be kind to their parents; there are many hadiths about this. For example, Prophet Muhammad (s) said that it is an act of worship to look at either of our parents with affection and kindness[8] and that God is pleased when someone has pleased their parents and God gets angry when someone has angered either one of their parents.[9]

Among these hadiths, there is one which is very moving. It says that if a child looks at either of their parents with anger, even though they have mistreated that child, then the child's prayer will not be accepted.[10] The hadith explains that even if parents have wronged their children, these children should still not look at them with anger. If they do, their prayers will not be accepted. Accordingly, we can only imagine what would happen if a child looks at their parents with anger when they have not even mistreated them. Respecting parents is obligatory and at the same time a very good

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قَالَ: فَلَكَ خَالَةٌ حَيَّةٌ؟ قَالَ: نَعَمْ قَالَ: فَابْرُرْهَا فَإِنَّهَا بِمَنْزِلَةِ الأُمِّ يُكَفِّرْ عَنْكَ مَا صَنَعْتَ.

[8] *Tuhaf al-'Uqūl,* p. 46. The original text is as follows:
قَالَ (ص): نَظَرُ الْوَلَدِ إِلَى وَالِدَيْهِ حُبّاً لَهُمَا عِبَادَةٌ

[9] *Nahj al-Fasāhah,* p. 760. The original text is as follows:
من أرضى والديه فقد أرضى الله من أسخط والديه فقد أسخط الله

[10] *al-Kāfi,* vol. 2, p. 349. The original text is as follows:
مَنْ نَظَرَ إِلَى أَبَوَيْهِ نَظَرَ مَاقِتٍ وَ هُمَا ظَالِمَانِ لَهُ لَمْ يَقْبَلِ اللهُ لَهُ صَلاةً

opportunity for us to make God pleased with us. Helping our parents, being available to them, praying for them, or giving charity on their behalf – in other words, doing anything we can to show our love and thanks to our parents – makes God pleased with us.

Of course, as we said previously, obeying parents has a limit: if obeying them leads to disobeying God. For example, a married man who now has a family to look after should not divorce his wife simply because his mother says he should. He must not even stop showing love to his wife because of his mother. This is simply unacceptable. A married person is responsible for his new family. One has to be careful and clever enough to find out how to please both one's parents and one's spouse. One should not upset one's parents for the sake of one's spouse, and vice versa. This needs experience and asking God for help and guidance. There have been instances where a man has abandoned his wife because of his parents. This is very much condemned in Islamic culture and such a person will be questioned about this by God on the Day of Judgment.

### Hospitality

Believers should be hospitable because we have a special responsibility towards people whom we accept as guests. We have to be kinder and more helpful to our guests than we normally are to other people. We have to serve everyone – all people and all creatures of God – as much as possible.

However, as we said earlier, there are certain groups of people for whom this becomes even more necessary, such as family members. Following on from this, Islamic teachings are very much supportive of guests. These teachings ask us to observe their rights, which includes treating them with honour and love, and showing that we are happy that they are visiting us. There is a very important hadith in which Prophet Muhammad (s) says to Lady Fatimah (a):

مَنْ كانَ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللّهِ وَ الْيَوْمِ الآخِرِ فَلْيُكْرِمْ ضَيْفَه

Whoever believes in God and the hereafter must honour their guest.[11]

A guest must be honoured and should be treated as someone who is sent by God to our house. If God Himself had told us to look after a guest then we would do our very best to please that guest and thereby show God that we have been kind to the person sent by Him. Every guest must be treated like this, especially a guest who is invited; although, even an unexpected guest should be treated with honour. To reject people is un-Islamic. At the same time, we should not put ourselves under pressure to look after our guests. Sometimes people want to treat their guests in a very luxurious way, when they cannot afford it. Islam tells us to do our best and to provide as much as we reasonably can. We should not go out of our way to host people by, for

[11] *al-Kāfī*, vol. 2, p. 667

example, borrowing money and putting ourselves into difficulty for several months to pay back our debts. This is strongly condemned. This is a very delicate matter. Sometimes we do not have anything at all to offer to our guest, so we have to borrow money. But even in this case, it is acceptable to give our guest only the minimum that we can manage. We have to judge according to what is reasonable.

According to Islam, hospitality is very valuable and encouraged because Islamic teachings want us to take the matter of hosting guests very easily and do not want the host to be put through undue trouble. Being hospitable should not be made very difficult because in that case, people would be discouraged from being hospitable towards guests.

Guests are also morally responsible to behave well and to comply with the wishes and instructions of their host. For example, a host might ask their guest to sit in a certain part of the house for some reason. The guest should listen and comply. A guest should not expect too much from their host or put too much pressure on them. For example, a guest should understand that at times the host might need to leave them on their own whilst they attend to some important business. A guest should also not stay in the house of their host for such a long time that it would disturb or annoy the host.

Therefore, both guest and host should try their best to respect one another and make each other feel comfortable. The guest should feel so comfortable that they think that even if they lived there for several weeks the host would not mind. Guests should behave in such a way that their visit does not cause any trouble to their host; for example, they should not stay for too long even if their host has not asked them to leave.

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**Summary**

1. Family unity is very important, even for a couple that does not have children. However, for a family with children, it becomes vastly more important and everyone is then even more responsible for safeguarding the family unit.

2. According to Islam, no matter how old we are or what status we have in society, we have to obey our parents. The only situation in which God tells us not to obey our parents is when they ask us to commit a sin.

3. Parents have such a high position in the sight of God that He mentions kindness to them immediately after speaking about worshipping Him.

4. Both of our parents have great rights upon us, but this is even more so with respect to our mothers.

5. Believers have a special responsibility towards people whom they accept as guests. We have to be kinder and more helpful to our guests than we normally are to other people.

6. According to Islam, hospitality is very valuable and encouraged because Islamic teachings want us to take the matter of hosting guests very easily and do not want the host to be put to undue trouble.

7. Guests are also morally responsible to behave well and to comply with the wishes and instructions of their host.

## Lesson Twenty-Two:

# Respecting Elders, the Sick and Teachers and Supporting the Oppressed and the Needy

### Introduction

We have been studying the virtues related to our relationships with different groups of people. We have discussed those related to relationships with family members – with particular attention to parents – and then we talked about guests and being hospitable towards them. Now we want to talk about other groups of people who deserve our special attention and respect. In this lesson, we will study each group briefly.

One such group is elders. This is not limited to the elders who are our relatives. In society in general, all elderly people deserve extra care, love, and support. Another group of people is those are ill. We will study some of the many traditions about the importance of visiting the sick and its etiquettes in Islam. The next group of people who deserve extra respect is teachers and scholars. We will then learn about the need to support oppressed people. We will see how, according to Islam, we are expected to stand by them

and help them. Finally, we will also study the significance of helping the poor and needy.

We will then move on to the fourth category of virtues which concerns our relationship with the environment and our responsibilities towards nature, animals, and plants. We will briefly study the many guidelines and instructions that Islam sets out regarding this subject. We will also provide sources for further study on the subject.

### Respecting Elders

In Islamic culture, elders enjoy a very high status. The idea that elders are just like other people, or that they are a burden, is strongly condemned. Elders have great rights over us. They have done an enormous amount for us as individuals and for society as a whole, and so naturally, when they are in need of our help, we should show our appreciation for what they have done. Furthermore, this is what God wants from us.

In a very beautiful hadith, Imam al-Sadiq (a) considers all the elders in society as his own relatives. He says:

لَيْسَ مِنَّا مَنْ لَمْ يُوَقِّرْ كَبِيرَنَا وَ لَمْ يَرْحَمْ صَغِيرَنَا

> He is not one of us who does not respect our elders and who does not show love and compassion to our children.[1]

Therefore, just as we have to show love to all children, even those who are not our own children, we also have to love all elders.

### Attending to the Sick

There are many guidelines about the importance of visiting the sick and the manner in which it should be carried out. For example, we should pray for them, talk to them about the blessings of God, and bring them gifts. When we visit them, we should make our visit brief, unless the sick person themselves asks us to stay longer. In other words, we have to do our best to help them, make them happy, and lessen the pain of their illness. There is a hadith which states:

> أَيُّمَا مُؤْمِنٍ عَادَ مُؤْمِناً خَاضَ فِي الرَّحْمَةِ خَوْضاً فَإِذَا جَلَسَ غَمَرَتْهُ الرَّحْمَةُ

> The believr who visits a [sick] believer is immersed in the mercy [of God] and when he sits he will be encompassed by the mercy.[2]

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[1] *al-Kāfī*, vol. 2, p. 165
[2] *al-Kāfī*, vol. 3, p. 120

It is very significant if the one who is sick prays for us because if they ask God to give us something, it is very likely that their request will be answered by God.

There is a story in some hadiths which is similar to what is found in the New Testament, in the Gospel of Matthew.[3] It says that on the Day of Judgment, God will ask some people why they had not visited Him when He was sick, why they had not fed Him when He was hungry, and why they had not given water to Him when He was thirsty. Those people will reply by asking how God could become thirsty, hungry, or sick. Then God will answer that such-and-such a person was sick and they did not visit them, such-and-such a person was hungry and they did not feed them, and that such-and-such a person was thirsty and they did not give them water. Then God will ask them why they did not know that if they had helped the sick, the hungry, or the thirsty, they would have found Him with that person.[4] This short but moving

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[3] Matthew, 25: 31 - 36

[4] *Nahj al-Haqq wa Kashf al-Sidq,* p. 374. The original text is as follows:

عَنْ رَسُولِ اللهِ (ص) قَالَ: إِنَّ اللهَ يَقُولُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ: يَا ابْنَ آدَمَ مَرِضْتُ فَلَمْ تَعُدْنِي، قَالَ يَا رَبِّ كَيْفَ أَعُودُكَ وَ أَنْتَ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ؟ قَالَ: أَمَا عَلِمْتَ أَنَّ فُلاناً مَرِضَ فَلَمْ تَعُدْهُ؟ أَمَا عَلِمْتَ أَنَّكَ لَوْعُدْتَهُ لَوَجَدْتَنِي عِنْدَهُ؟ يَا ابْنَ آدَمَ، اسْتَطْعَمْتُكَ فَلَمْ تُطْعِمْنِي. قَالَ: يَا رَبِّ كَيْفَ أُطْعِمُكَ وَ أَنْتَ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ؟ قَالَ: إِنَّهُ اسْتَطْعَمَكَ عَبْدِي فُلانٌ فَلَمْ تُطْعِمْهُ، أَمَا عَلِمْتَ أَنَّكَ لَوْ أَطْعَمْتَهُ لَوَجَدْتَ ذَلِكَ عِنْدِي؟ يَا ابْنَ آدَمَ، اسْتَسْقَيْتُكَ فَلَمْ تَسْقِنِي. قَالَ: يَا رَبِّ كَيْفَ

story demonstrates that visiting the sick is like visiting God Himself.

In addition, it is the responsibility of the whole society to try to treat and cure the sick. A sick person also has to be prepared to accept treatment and cannot refuse treatment and decide to die. Then it is the role of society to provide the sick person with the treatment they need. If they cannot afford it themselves, then the government must pay for the treatment. These are some of the issues in Islamic bioethics. God says in the Qur'an:

مَنْ أَحْياها فَكَأَنَّما أَحْيَا النَّاسَ جَميعا

*Whoever saves one life, it is as if he has saved the lives of all people.* (5:32)

One way of saving people's lives is to treat them when they become sick. It is a mutual responsibility of the sick and of physicians or society in general. In other words, seeking treatment is the duty of the person who is ill, and offering treatment is an obligation on society, doctors, nurses, hospitals, and even on other people who can help. Society cannot leave the poor to die. People must collect money in order to help them, or the government must pay for the treatment.

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أَسْقِيكَ وَ أَنْتَ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ؟ قَالَ: اسْتَسْقَاكَ عَبْدِي فُلانٌ فَلَمْ تَسْقِهِ، أَمَاعَلِمْتَ أَنَّكَ لَوْ سَقَيْتَهُ لَوَجَدْتَ ذَلِكَ عِنْدِي؟

Prophet Muhammad (s) said:

> إِنَّ اللهَ أَنْزَلَ الدَّاءَ وَ الدَّوَاءَ وَ جَعَلَ لِكُلِّ دَاءٍ دَوَاءً فَتَدَاوَوا
>
> Seek treatment for God has not sent down any illness without sending down its treatment.[5]

Thus, every illness has a treatment and a cure. This means that medical scientists should therefore be very hopeful that they can find treatments and cures for all types of diseases.

## Being Humble in Front of Teachers

Another group that deserves more attention and love is teachers and scholars. In his *Treatise on Rights,*[6] Imam al Sajjad (a) lists the rights of teachers. Some of them are as follows:

> Your teacher has the following rights. First, that you offer him your total respect. Second, that you listen attentively when he speaks. Third, that you never raise your voice in his presence.[7]

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[5] *Bihār al-Anwār,* vol. 59, p. 76

[6] *Risālah al-Huqūq.* The original text is as follows:
وَ حَقُّ سَائِسِكَ بِالْعِلْمِ التَّعْظِيمُ لَهُ وَ التَّوْقِيرُ لِمَجْلِسِهِ وَ حُسْنُ الاسْتِمَاعِ إِلَيْهِ وَ الإِقْبَالُ عَلَيْهِ وَ أَنْ لاتَرْفَعَ عَلَيْهِ صَوْتَك

[7] *Bihār al-Anwār,* vol. 2, p. 42

The more we know, the more humble we must be in front of our teacher. Even if our knowledge surpasses the knowledge of our teacher, we still have to be respectful to them. If someone was our teacher in primary school, we have to continue to respect them and pray for them. Unfortunately, in modern times, respect for teachers is disappearing just as it is for parents and for elders.

### Supporting the Oppressed

Oppressed people are another group of people who deserve special attention according to Islam. If someone is mistreated or wronged, we must not sit back and take no action. People should not allow this sort of oppression to become so widespread that the fact that it goes unchecked makes it seem normal and people are no longer concerned about supporting the oppressed.

Now that we know that supporting the oppressed is obligatory, we should learn how to do this properly and effectively. First, we should give them moral support, and second, we should help them – by any means necessary and with any kind of support needed – to overcome the situation and to bring the person who has wronged them to justice.

Indeed, if we prevent unjust people from committing injustice, this is actually beneficial for them as well. In some hadiths we read that one of the things which we have to observe with respect to our brothers in faith is to help them

whether they are the oppressor or oppressed. The necessity for helping them when they are oppressed is obvious, but when asked what it means to help them when they are the oppressor, the answer was to stop them from oppressing people.[8] If someone is doing something wrong and we love them, then not only should we not help them to continue committing that wrong action, but we should also attempt to stop them. This is like preventing someone from drinking poisoned water. If we love that person, we will try to stop them from drinking it. In the same way, if someone is mistreating his wife or children or parents or others, and we really love that person, we should stop them from doing so by talking to them, and encouraging them to be good and change their behaviour. Then, if they do not listen to our advice, we have to use all legitimate means to stop them. We must not simply remain indifferent to any given situation.

In the Qur'an, in Chapter al-Nisā, God says:

يا أَيُّها الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ كُونُواْ قَوَّامِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ شُهَدَاءَ لِلَّهِ وَ لَوْ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَوِ الْوَالِدَيْنِ وَ الأَقْرَبِينَ إِن يَكُنْ غَنِيًّا أَوْ فَقِيراً فَاللهُ أَوْلَىٰ بِهِما فَلاتَتَّبِعُواْ الهَوى أَن تَعْدِلُواْ وَ إِن تَلْوُاْ أَوْ تُعْرِضُواْ فَإِنَّ اللهَ كَانَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيراً

[8] *Rīyāḍ al-Sālikīn,* vol. 3, p.449. The original text is as follows:
أنصر أخاك ظالما أو مظلوما، قيل: كيف ينصره ظالما؟ قال: يمنعه من الظلم

> *O you who have faith! Be maintainers of justice and witnesses for the sake of God, even if it should be against yourselves or [your] parents and near relatives, and whether it be [someone] rich or poor, for God has a greater right over them. So do not follow [your] desires, lest you should be unfair, and if you distort [the testimony] or disregard [it], God is indeed well aware of what you do.* (4:135)

We have to stand up against oppression in all circumstances and with respect to all people. In a piece of advice given to his sons, Imam Ali (a) said:

> كُونَا لِلظَّالِمِ خَصْماً وَ لِلْمَظْلُومِ عَوْناً
>
> Be an enemy to the oppressor! And (be) a friend and helper to those who are oppressed.[9]

Any society that honours and implements this advice will improve day by day.

## Helping the Needy

Another issue which needs to be discussed is the significance of giving charity. Although we have already discussed the importance of serving people in general, giving charity is such an important instance of this, and it deserves special

[9] *Nahj al-Balāghah (Subhi Sālih)*, p. 421

attention. Islamic culture encourages people to spend their wealth for the sake of God, explaining that we need to be helping the poor, those who are in debt, and those who cannot afford to provide education for themselves and their family.

The Qur'an contains several verses about charity. In Chapter al-Baqarah, the Qur'an says:

الَّذِينَ يُنفِقُونَ أَمْوَالَهُمْ فِي سَبِيلِ اللهِ ثُمَّ لَا يُتْبِعُونَ مَا أَنفَقُوا مَنًّا وَ
لَا أَذًى لَّهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ وَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَ لَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ
قَوْلٌ مَّعْرُوفٌ وَ مَغْفِرَةٌ خَيْرٌ مِّن صَدَقَةٍ يَتْبَعُهَا أَذًى وَ اللهُ غَنِيٌّ
حَلِيمٌ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تُبْطِلُوا صَدَقَاتِكُم بِالْمَنِّ وَالْأَذَى
كَالَّذِي يُنفِقُ مَالَهُ رِئَاءَ النَّاسِ وَ لَا يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَ الْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ فَمَثَلُهُ
كَمَثَلِ صَفْوَانٍ عَلَيْهِ تُرَابٌ فَأَصَابَهُ وَ ابِلٌ فَتَرَكَهُ صَلْدًا لَا يَقْدِرُونَ
عَلَىٰ شَيْءٍ مِّمَّا كَسَبُوا وَ اللهُ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الْكَافِرِينَ وَ مَثَلُ
الَّذِينَ يُنفِقُونَ أَمْوَالَهُمُ ابْتِغَاءَ مَرْضَاتِ اللهِ وَتَثْبِيتًا مِّنْ أَنفُسِهِمْ كَمَثَلِ
جَنَّةٍ بِرَبْوَةٍ أَصَابَهَا وَابِلٌ فَآتَتْ أُكُلَهَا ضِعْفَيْنِ فَإِن لَّمْ يُصِبْهَا وَابِلٌ
فَطَلٌّ وَ اللهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ

*Those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah and then do not follow up what they have spent with reproaches and affronts, they shall have their reward near their Lord, and they will have no fear, nor will they grieve. An honourable word with pardon is better than a charity followed by affront. Allah is all-*

*sufficient, most forbearing. O you who have faith! Do not render your charities void by reproaches and affronts, like those who spend their wealth to be seen by people and have no faith in Allah and the Last Day. Their parable is that of a rock covered with soil: a downpour strikes it, leaving it bare. They have no power over anything of what they have earned, and Allah does not guide the faithless lot. The parable of those who spend their wealth seeking Allah's pleasure and to confirm themselves, is that of a garden on a hillside: the downpour strikes it, whereupon it brings forth its fruit twofold; and if it is not a downpour that strikes it, then a shower, and Allah sees best what you do.* (2:262-265)

One of the interesting points about this verse is that God says that those who spend their wealth in the way of God will neither fear nor grieve. This condition has been mentioned in another verse concerning the friends of God, the *awlīya'u Allah*.[10] This shows that the group that gives their wealth for the sake of God is either amongst the *awlīya'u Allah* or at least they are equal to them in this regard.

Another point that this verse teaches us is that when we help someone, we are actually the main beneficiary. The person we help receives some money, but we have received God's

[10] The Qur'an 10:62

mercy and reward, which is incomparable to any amount of money. The verse says that God is the All-Sufficient; when He asks us to help others, it is not for Himself. When we say that we are giving wealth for the sake of God, it does not mean that we are benefiting God; rather, we are the ones who give a little and gain a great deal. No matter how much we give in this way, it is really only a little – even if it is enough to build a masjid – because the money we give is worldly and everything in this world is "a trivial enjoyment" as God says in the Qur'an.[11] On the other hand, however, we gain God's mercy, and that is priceless. Therefore, if we are intelligent we should search for opportunities to help people.

Some people do not have enough money to help others but this does not mean that they cannot carry out charitable deeds. If we do not have money, we may have time or expertise with which we can help others. Even for a person who has nothing to give he can offer at least a kind word or even as we find it in hadith just an affectionate smile.[12]

When we can please God and attract His mercy with something as apparently small as an affectionate smile, why

[11] The Qur'an 3:197

[12] The original text is as follows:

تَبَسُّمُكَ فِي وَجْهِ أَخِيكَ لَكَ صَدَقَةٌ

do we sometimes deprive others of our respect or kind words?

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**Summary**

1. In Islamic culture, elders enjoy a very high status. The idea that elders are just like other people or that they are a burden is strongly condemned.

2. It is the responsibility of the whole society to try to treat and cure the sick. A sick person must also be prepared to accept treatment; a sick person cannot refuse treatment and decide to die. It is then the role of society to provide the sick person with the treatment they need. If they cannot afford it themselves, the government must pay for the treatment.

3. Imam al-Sajjad (a) said: "Your teacher has the following rights: First, that you offer him your total respect. Second, that you listen attentively when he speaks. Third, that you never raise your voice in his presence..."

4. One of the rights of our brethren in faith is to help them, whether they are the oppressor or oppressed. To help the oppressed, we must stand by them and support them in all circumstances and with respect to all people. 5. To help the oppressor, we must prevent them from oppressing.

6. In chapter 2 of the Qur'an, God says that those who spend their wealth in the way of God and then do not follow up what they have done with reproaches and affronts to the one whom they have helped, shall have their reward near their Lord and they will have no fear nor will they grieve.

7. An honourable word with pardon is better than giving charity followed by affront.

8. When we help someone, we are actually the main beneficiary. The person we have helped receives some money but we have received God's mercy and reward, which is cannot be compared to any amount of money.

9. If we have nothing material to give, we can at least offer a kind word or even just an affectionate smile.

## Lesson Twenty-Three:

## The Envirnment

### Introduction

So far we have described three different groups of virtues in the Islamic moral system. We started with those which relate to our relationship with God, then continued with those which relate to our relationship with ourselves, and then we studied those which relate to our relationship with other people. In this lesson, we will study some points regarding our relationship with the rest of the world, including animals, plants, and even non-living beings like water, soil, or air.

There are numerous points in Islamic teachings regarding the issue of environmental ethics. Here we will briefly study some of them.

### Nature in General

There are more than 750 verses in the Qur'an related to nature. Fourteen chapters of the Qur'an are named after certain animals and natural incidents such as: 'the Cow', 'the Cattle', 'the Thunder', 'the Bee', 'the Ant', 'the Daybreak', 'the Sun', 'the Night', 'the Fig', and 'the Elephant'.

Moreover, there are many cases in which God takes an oath by a particular natural phenomenon, such as 'the dawn'[1] and 'the fig and olive.'[2] In numerous verses, the Qur'an states that all natural phenomena have awareness of God and glorify God:

وَ سَخَّرْنَا مَعَ دَاوُدَ الْجِبَالَ يُسَبِّحْنَ وَ الطَّيرِ

*And We disposed the mountains and the birds to glorify [Us] with David* (21:79)

The Qur'an also says that according to both His creation and legislation, God has made human beings capable of benefiting from nature. God has given us the necessary power and permission to utilise nature for our benefit.

In the Qur'an we read:

وَ سَخَّرَ لَكُمْ مَّا فِى السَّمَاوَاتِ وَ مَا فِى الأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا مِّنْهُ إِنَّ فِى ذَالِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُون

*And He has disposed for you[r benefit] whatever is in the heavens and whatever is the earth, all is from Him. There are indeed signs in that for a people who reflect.* (45:13)

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[1] 89:1, (وَ الْفَجْرِ)

[2] 95:1, (وَ التِّينِ وَ الزَّيْتُون)

**Earth**

In Islamic scriptures, the earth is introduced as an origin for the creation of human beings. The Qur'an says:

مِنْها خَلَقْناكُمْ وَ فِيها نُعِيدُكُمْ و مِنْها نُخْرِجُكُمْ تارَةً أُخْرى

*From it [earth] We created you and into it We shall send you back and from it We will raise you a second time.* (20:55)

Elsewhere in the Qur'an we read:

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ لَكُم مَّا فِي الأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا

*It is He who has created for you all things that are on earth.* (2:29)

It can be understood from this verse that God has created the earth for our benefit; He permits us to benefit from it.

However, we also have a responsibility to utilise it in a proper way and to act as a benevolent trustee and guardian. As human beings, we must ensure that we use nature and indeed every blessing from God in a completely responsible way. We should not think that we are only accountable regarding our treatment of human beings.

In the Qur'an, God says that on the Day of Judgment we will be questioned about the way in which we have utilised and treated the blessings that He gave us:

ثُمَّ لَتُسْئَلُنَّ يَوْمَئِذٍ عَنِ النَّعِيمِ

*Then on that day you shall most certainly be questioned about the blessings.* (102:8)

Everything in this world which is at our disposal is a gift and, at the same time, a trust. We should not destroy it just because it is a gift. According to Islam, we should not destroy anything. We should not believe, for example, that because a particular amount of money or some equipment belongs to us, we can have the inclination and freedom to destroy it. These are trusts with which God has entrusted us; we have a duty to take care of them. The same is true regarding our life; we are not allowed to commit suicide or harm ourselves. Life is a gift from God and we have to appreciate it and look after it. We have to make sure that we either improve the condition of that gift or at the very least, we do not make it worse. For example, if we live on a piece of land, or near a forest or river, and we cannot improve its condition, then we should at least try to maintain its current condition. Or for example, if we need some food, we should not use more than we reasonably need. We have to make sure that we reduce our consumption of precious natural resources.

Every generation must make improvements. God has asked us to make this world a better place, to improve it, and to develop it. Islam pays special attention to the countryside

and wildlife, to farming and the cultivation of land. In some hadiths, farming is considered to be the best occupation.

Furthermore, there is a hadith from the Prophet (s) in which he (s) says:

تَحَفَّظُوا مِنَ الأَرْضِ فَإِنَّهَا أُمُّكُم

You should look after the earth because it is your mother.[3]

We have to be very careful about the way we treat the environment, not just because we may face a crisis. Even if it is guaranteed that we would not face any environmental crisis, we still have to be very careful. Thus, it is not simply because we are worried that we should then start to regulate things. Unfortunately, even with the situation we face nowadays, sometimes we do not see enough regulations in place when it comes to air pollution, water consumption, wasting energy resources, and so on. However, even if we can guarantee that there will be no problem or shortage on account of our actions, we must still not waste even one cup of water or one handful of soil.

There are many verses in the Qur'an that ask us to act responsibly and to be very respectful about God's gifts and blessings. For example, we read in the Qur'an:

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[3] *Bihār al-Anwār,* vol. 7, p. 97

يَا بَنِى ءَادَمَ خُذُواْ زِينَتَكُمْ عِندَ كلُ مَسْجِدٍ وَ كُلُواْ وَ اشْرَبُوا وَ لا تُسْرِفوا إِنَّهُ لا يُحِبُّ الْمُسْرِفين

*O children of Adam! Put on your adornment on every occasion of prayer and eat and drink, but do not waste; indeed Allah does not like the wasteful.* (7:31)

In addition to not wasting or destroying God's blessings, the Qur'an says that we should also try to improve them:

هُوَ أَنشَأَكُم مِّنَ الأَرْضِ وَ اسْتَعْمَرَكُمْ فِيهَا

*He brought you forth from the earth and asked you to improve it.* (11:61)

**Water**

In Islamic culture, water is very highly regarded. The word *maa'* (water) is used in the Qur'an about 60 times. Water is introduced as the origin and source of life. For example, the Qur'an says:

وَ جَعَلْنَا مِنَ الْمَاءِ كلُ شىءٍ حَىّ

*And We have made of water everything living* (21:30)

Furthermore, we also have a hadith which says that a person who is near a river should not take water from the river and then throw it away tip it out for no reason. This is

considered wasting water and is not allowed.[4] If, for example, we want to use the water to drink, wash something, or water a flower, of course we are then allowed to use the water. But if there is no reason to take the water, we should not use it. Even a cup of water must not be wasted; accordingly, if we only want to drink half a cup, we should not fill the cup completely because then we would have to throw away the rest.

### Animals

According to Islam, there are many instructions regarding the rights of animals. Islamic scholars have made it clear that we cannot kill animals merely for the sake of pleasure. From the Islamic perspective, there is no such thing as hunting for pleasure. We can only kill an animal either because it is putting our safety at risk and we want to save our life, or because we want to use its meat to feed ourselves. In one of his essays, Mohammad Taqī Ja'farī, a great contemporary scholar, says:

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[4] *Minhāj al-Brā'ah fī Sharh Nahj al-Balāghah,* vol. 18, p. 339. The original text is as follows:

و يفهم من بعض الأخبار أنّ الإسراف على ضربين: حرام و مكروه فالأوّل مثل إتلاف مال و نحوه فيما هو فوق المتعارف، و الثانى إتلاف شيء ذى نفع بلا غرض و منه إهراق ما بقى من شرب ماء الفرات و نحوها خارج الماء و قد روى ذلک عن علىّ عليه السّلام.

> Consideration of all sources of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) leads to the conclusion that animals must not be killed unless there is a legal permission by God, like benefiting from them or being safe from their harm. There are adequate reasons for prohibiting hunting animals for fun and one can argue from these reasons for the prohibition of killing animals without having a permitting cause.[5]

Furthermore, we have to be very respectful regarding animals. According to Shi'a jurists, animals must be provided with food, water, shelter, and even medicine if necessary. They also state that according to Islam, if our neighbour has an animal and they are not there to look after it or they cannot afford food and so on for it, then we are responsible to give that animal food, water, or whatever it may need.

**Plants**

Islam highly recommends planting trees and urges people to protect them to the extent that planting a tree is considered an act of worship for which special prayer is recommended.[6]

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[5] *Rasā'il Fiqhī*, p. 250

[6] *Makārim al-Akhlāq*, p. 353. The original text is as follows:

There are also many instructions about looking after trees and hadiths about how important it is to carry out farming and planting. There is even a hadith which says:

> If resurrection is starting and one of you has a sapling in his hand which he can plant before he stands up, he must do so.[7]

Thus, this hadith advises that even if the world is about to end and there will be no future for that sapling, we still have the responsibility to plant it. This means that under normal, everyday conditions, our responsibility is even greater. This demonstrates how much attention Islamic teachings give to the environment. Indeed there are many more hadiths regarding this. [8]

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عَنْ أَبِی جَعْفَرٍ (ع) قَالَ: إِذَا أَرَدْتَ أَنْ تَزْرَعَ زَرْعاً فَخُذْ قَبْضَةً مِنَ الْبَذْرِ بِيَدِكَ ثُمَّ اسْتَقْبِلِ الْقِبْلَةَ وَ قُلْ أَأَنْتُمْ تَزْرَعُونَهُ أَمْ نَحْنُ الزَّارِعُونَ ثَلاثَ مَرَّاتٍ ثُمَّ قُلِ اللهُمَّ اجْعَلْهُ حَرْثاً مُبَارَكاً وَ ارْزُقْنَا فِيهِ السَّلامَةَ وَ التَّمَامَ وَ اجْعَلْهُ حَبّاً مُتَرَاكِباً وَ لا تَحْرِمْنِی خَيْرَ مَا أَبْتَغِی وَ لا تَفْتِنِّی بِمَا مَتَّعْتَنِی بِحَقِّ مُحَمَّدٍ وَ آلِهِ الطَّيِّبِينَ الطَّاهِرِينَ ثُمَّ ابْذُرِ الْقَبْضَةَ الَّتِی فِی يَدِكَ إِنْ شَاءَ اللهُ

[7] *Nahj al-Fasāhah*, p. 267. The original text is as follows:
إن قامت السّاعة و فی يد أحدكم فسيلة فإن استطاع أن لا يقوم حتّى يغرسها فليغرسها

[8] To read more about Islamic bioethics, please refer to *Islamic Bioethics: A General Scheme* by Dr. Shomali. The paper is available at www.mashomali.com. If you are interested in Islam's point of view on environmental ethics, please refer to *Aspects of Environmental Ethics: An*

**Summary**

1. The fourth category of moral virtues consists of those virtues related to our relationship with the rest of the world – with nature, animals, and plants.

2. It can be understood from the Qur'an that God has created the earth for our benefit; He has allowed us to benefit from it. However, at the same time we have a responsibility to use it in a proper way and act as a benevolent trustee.

3. We have to make sure that we either improve the condition of the blessings which God has given us or at the very least, that we do not make it worse.

4. According to Islam, there are many instructions regarding the rights of animals. For example, Islamic scholars have made it clear that we should not kill animals merely for pleasure.

5. Shi'a jurists have issued verdicts stating that we must provide animals with food, water, shelter, and even medicine if necessary.

6. There are also many instructions about looking after trees and how important it is to carry out farming and planting.

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*Islamic Perspective* by Dr. Shomali. The paper is also available at www.mashomali.com.

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